

# *An Introduction to*



## *The Russian Soul*

*The Russian Leadership Development Team*

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# *An Introduction to the Russian Soul*

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**Written by the  
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This is for you-- but will the rhythm  
Of this dark music touch your ear?  
And will your modest nature fathom  
My heart's unruly striving here?  
Or will the poet's bold submission  
Of verse, as once of love, again  
Pass by without your recognition,  
As unacknowledged now as then?

Know it again, as least, the rhyme  
That once, I think, was dear to you-- And  
Know that since that parting chime,  
Whatever changing fate I knew,  
The memory of words last spoken  
By you, and your sad wilderness,  
Have been my only sacerd token,  
Sole refuge, ultimate redress.

Alexander Pushkin  
Opening lines of "Poltava"

*St. Petersburg, 1964*

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*She wanted  
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That was the  
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Tiny flecks of snow, each light as a breath, filled the air outside Victor's window. He watched the last evidence of daylight slip away and cursed the darkness. There was simply too much of it now in the long winter nights of St. Petersburg. Since Natasha had gone and taken Sergei, their son, with her, darkness left him painfully aware that he was alone. Every night the reality of her leaving broke over him once again, as though he was experiencing her departure for the first time.

He should have seen it coming — Natasha leaving him. He knew that now. All that arguing, the midnight lectures when Sergei was asleep. She was tired of being the brunt of his father's jokes while Victor sat there with that stupid, weak grin on his face, saying nothing. She wanted another apartment; she wanted a better life, more opportunity. He was 32 years old and she wanted him to be a man, she said. That was the problem — she wanted the impossible.

It was strange how he knew that night that she was gone, at the very moment he put his key in the lock of the front door. The sound was just too hollow, too frighteningly still. He opened the door and saw her note, but there was no need to read it. He knew she had left and why.

It did not occur to him to go after her or make a case for her return. What was there to say? Her words were an indictment to which he had no good rebuttal. Only the thought of Sergei made him think of begging her to come back. Yes, for the chance to gather up that small blonde frame of a boy in his arms one more time, he would crawl on his knees for the

opportunity. But would it make any difference? She would only leave him again. And another day he would come home to the sound of a hollow key, the reminder of his failure.

Victor Denesovitch had long ago learned to be content with little, to resist the urge to improve his lot. What happened, happened – that was all. Victor

was a Russian man, molded by his mother and grandmother, following the example of his father but ultimately, formed by the socialist state.

In his weeks alone now, Victor could not complain that he was bored. Not exactly. Every night he followed a similar ritual, his own sacred vigil. He fixed a cup of weak tea or a glass of vodka that he drank slowly as he watched the shadows gather outside. The stories of his childhood came floating to the surface of his mind like dead leaves on a pond, little fragments that begged to be gathered.

In 1934, shortly before Victor's birth, his father had faced a lonely vigil, too. Only the circumstances were different, more intense, with more at stake. These were the years of Stalin's purges when no one felt safe, because no one was. Victor's father, Grigoriy, was



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***He could not escape the responsibility to defend his brother. He knew Andrei was innocent. Yet he could not do it...***

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faced with a terrible decision. His brother, Andrei, had been arrested at work, accused of being disloyal to the revolution. He was tortured and sentenced under section 43-c. to ten years of hard labor. No one had worked harder at the loading dock than Andrei; he had never spoken a derogatory word against Father Stalin. And then, for no reason, just like that – arrested! It was crazy.

For three days and nights Victor's father, Grigoriy, lived through his own torture. Would he go downtown and plead his brother's case before the NKVD? A mistake had been made, he would say. Perhaps they would understand they had the wrong man. Andrei was no enemy of the people. Grigoriy remembered the terrified screams of the small children in the apartment below him last year. Both of their parents had been arrested in the middle of the night and taken away, God knows where, leaving their orphaned children behind. Grigoriy did nothing at the time. If these were enemies of the people and he helped their children, didn't that make him an enemy of the people, too?

But this was different. No matter how Victor's father reasoned it, he could not escape the responsibility to defend his brother. He knew Andrei was innocent. Yet he could not do it. He could not put one foot in front of the other, open the door, and face his brother's accusers. Hundreds of wives had stood for days with parcels for their interned husbands — only to be waved away in the end. Several had been arrested and deported, too. Grigoriy knew what had happened when his friend, Levchenko, marched down to speak for his father; he was shipped to Siberia. Grigoriy had a daughter two years old — and his wife was pregnant again. The risks were just too high.

In the end, Grigoriy never did decide. After three days a comrade informed him that his brother had been loaded like cattle with other prisoners on a Stolypin railroad car bound for the interior. Grigoriy knew that meant Siberia, and that the ten year sentence probably meant death.

From that day on, Grigoriy changed, or so his son, Victor, was quietly told later as he grew up. "Your father wasn't always like this," they used to whisper to him. "He's had a rough go of it." Victor knew his father simply as this man who would walk through the door every evening, wave off dinner, collapse in a corner chair and begin drinking. He didn't fight. He didn't argue. He just retreated into a haze of vodka.

Rather miraculously, Andrei did survive and return to his family. For Victor, Andrei was the uncle who had managed to outlast the dreaded camps.

Victor does not recall that his father ever looked either of them in the eye.

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*Victor knew his father as this man who would walk through the door every evening, wave off dinner, collapse in a corner chair and begin drinking.*

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*"A mystery wrapped inside an enigma" - words often used to describe Russia and the Russians.*

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## *An Introduction to the Russian Soul*

"A mystery wrapped inside an enigma." These are the words often used to describe Russia and Russians. As a people, Russians have all the intricate complexities and depth of a great Tolstoy novel; their culture is as rich and diverse as any on earth. Insight into Russian life is a bit like looking at a wonderfully ornate Matrioshka . Opening the doll before your eyes is the first of many succeeding invitations to see what lies hidden further inside.

This booklet aspires to a fairly humble goal. It hopes to serve as an introduction to Russian life in a way which explores some of the hopes, fears and painful incongruities which many Russians carry on the inside. In that sense, it could be said to be describing aspects of "the Russian soul." Such a statement comes with many important disclaimers. This material does not describe any one Russian — or all Russians, in general. It is not intended to be a final word, hence the use of the word, "introduction". If over-simplification or rash conclusions result from reading this booklet, then the material has been misused. "An Introduction to the Russian Soul" is written to provide Westerners with some insight in the Russian psyche/soul in a way that will allow us to become humble students of the people we have come to serve in Christ's name.

Having said this, most readers will justifiably want to know how this material was gathered. It represents a team effort and the amalgamated findings of a number of sources: over 400 surveys with a variety of in-country Russians, extensive individual interviews, selected contemporary and historical readings, and significantly, an in-depth research



project using visual screenings to provide a "cultural translation" of Russian views of themselves as individuals, their country and life condition, and God.

**Where do we begin as we think about ministering in a Russian culture?**

In a word, we begin in the past. As Westerners seeking to understand, we must appreciate what Russians have experienced — and endured — even in this century alone as they stand at a unique place in their history.

Most Westerners, new to Russian soil, tend to see Communism as a catastrophe that represents an unfortunate aberration in Russia's national life. In reality, even a brief overview of the last five centuries reveals that Communism was but the coming together of various aspects of culture and thought which have existed here for centuries: reliance on brute power to achieve desired ends, sacrificing the well-being of the many to serve the few, transferring individual freedom to the care of the Tsar (and later, the Party).

With an immense territory to govern, a harsh climate and no cultural or religious foundation for individual freedoms, Russia stumbled into the 20th century ripe for the grip of Communist totalitarianism. Russians have repeatedly been hamstrung between their desire for stability — and the longing for freedom. Their national challenge has been to gain a larger measure of freedom without creating untenable chaos and instability in the process.

Since the days of Ivan the Terrible, there has been an impenetrable wall in Russia separating the rulers — and the ruled. Until 1861, fully 85% of Russia's population were serfs with no personal freedoms at all. They

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*"One sun shines  
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were bound to noblemen whose estates they maintained. Russian society itself was strictly hierarchical, with the Tsar on top, who was sustained by a small class of landed noblemen. The rest were serfs, whose destiny it was to support on their shoulders the grandiose lifestyle of those above them.

This class system was held rigidly in place by a perversion of Russian Orthodoxy that viewed the Tsar as the brother of Jesus, whose mand-

ate could not be questioned. Russian proverbs taught to children from infancy underscored this idea: "Only God and the Tsar know" and "One sun shines in heaven and the Russian tsar on earth." No European potentate claiming the divine right of kings could come close to the control the Tsar of Russia exercised over his subjects.

Over the centuries of Russia's history, individual human life has been an expendable commodity completely at the mercy of the Tsars and Party leaders. One example from the reign of Peter the Great is representative of many others. When Peter decided to build his monument to European architecture, St. Petersburg, he chose a mosquito-infested swamp on the edge of the gulf of Finland. St. Petersburg was built during the 20 hour days

of the Russian summer with serfs brought in from the Ural Mountains. As the workers collapsed exhausted, they were buried on the spot and a fresh team put in their place. The Cathedral of St. Isaac's, with its massive columns, stands atop 100,000 of these casual graves. The city of St. Petersburg is called by Russians, "the city of bones."

This legacy of authority and power, which could not be questioned or successfully opposed, became the means by which the Communists were able to control a territory so vast for a period of 70 years. Lenin and Stalin, in particular, ruled by fear and terror. As Russians begin to relearn their history in its true form, estimates vary about the number of Russian lives lost during the Communist years. Most say at least 60 million died, in labor camps, in "purgings" and by systematic starvation. Others count the blunders of the War years when Stalin sacrificed huge numbers of Russian soldiers in his fierce determination to trust Hitler until proven wrong. Those figures reach as high as 80 to 100 million lives. To put this in perspective, consider that in 200 years of American history, including four major wars, the casualties total about one million.

Russians are only in the last few years beginning to recover the true extent of these atrocities. "Imagine being an adult," writes one Russian philosopher in Remnick's *Lenin's Tomb*, "and nearly all the truth you know about the world around you and outside your own country has to be absorbed in a year or two or three...[T]he entire country is in a state of mass disorientation."

Numbers like these are hard to grasp. What do 60 million deaths feel like in the collective psyche of Russians? Try to picture in your mind what one such "memory" would be like. Outside the town of Kuropathy (five

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*What do sixty million deaths feel like in the collective Russian psyche?*

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miles northeast of Minsk) stands a forest of tall pines that sigh peacefully in the wind. But as you walk deeper into the trees, the silence grows eerie and there is a feeling of desolation, sheer emptiness. As your eyes adjust to the darkness, you see great gaping holes in the ground, unmarked hollows gouged into the earth. They are graves — sagging like hammocks beneath a mound of displaced dirt. Between 50 to 250 corpses lie in each grave, stacked layer upon layer. These malevolent hollows stretch in all directions, as far as your eye can see, entombed in acre upon acre of dark, eerie forest.

The story is this: Over the course of four years (1937-1941), individuals were lined up and shot in this forest every day, morning and evening, like clockwork. They were farmers, members of the intelligentsia, people who belonged to the wrong political party, individuals whose "crime" was that they had graduated from the university, Russian Orthodox and Catholic believers, priests, those who protected Byelorussian culture — up to 16 truckloads of "enemies of the people" were killed here each day for four years.

With hands untied, they were led by pairs up to the edge of the huge pit dug for their collapsing bodies. Crying for mercy, praying, remembering family members, they were shot — annihilated under a system of secret informers in which an investigator was paid 150 rubles for each denunciation of an "enemy." 150 rubles was the price of a human life.

Those in the surrounding villages lived hearing the daily round of shots — and the screams and pleas for mercy. "Oh, God, why?" "We're innocent." "Please help us." A significant number of these villagers survive even today, their accounts now dutifully recorded. They have lived for many years with the knowledge that only their guilty silence saved

them from the same fate.

The Russians have a saying that, at Kuropathy, even the trees cry. Only the coming of World War II with the threat of German planes overhead put an end to the daily shootings. More than 250,000 people died in the forests surrounding Kuropathy. Kuropathy is only one of eight killing fields that lie around Minsk. And the massacres around Minsk are only one small slice of the tragedies of the Stalinist years.

**How have Russians been affected by what they've lived through?**

Alexander Zaichenko, a Russian economist and a Christian, gave this assessment in 1990 as to where he saw his countrymen as they approach the end of this century. He likened Russia to a troubled adolescent whose developmental stages had been arrested by the trauma of her times.

*"Though the third millennium is on our threshold, our country still remains a teenager, compared to the countries of the West; an adolescent whose childhood and adolescence were devoid of most things essential for normal development and who stepped into his adulthood, messy, bloody, and distorted, inadequately prepared for his vital functions there."*

If we follow this analogy, admitting its limitations, and liken Russia as a government to a giant family — then its inhabitants are like abandoned, abused children who are trying to find their way into true maturity. "Mother Russia" became a powerful, harsh and unpredictable parent-figure — and her "children" suffered in the process. Indeed, many Russians approach life like adults who were abandoned or abused as children. Like Victor and his son, Sergei, the weight of past

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A. Zaichenko

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generations rests heavy on their shoulders. This insight into their soul, their "psyche," allows us to relate to them with genuine empathy and much greater understanding.

Russians seem to experience shame (rather than guilt) as a core issue, a deeply felt reality, of their soul. What does it mean to feel shame? Shame is marked by an inner statement that could be described like this: It's not just that I have failed or done something wrong in my life. I, myself, my whole being is irreparably flawed. I am hopelessly defective.

Shame is like a poison that washes over a person's heart until everything they see and experience is colored by its presence. It is important to realize that Russians may never put this experience into words. But their relationship to you, the message of the Gospel, to God Himself will be colored by this internal message.

Following this analogy of Russians as abandoned, abused children, we can understand how shame has become so integral a part of the Russian experience. Abused and abandoned children succumb to a type of emotional reasoning (meaning it is not a particularly rational or conscious process) that flows in this fashion: such awful things have happened to them because they are unlovable. Terrible things have taken place and they feel bad, or have felt bad. And with a child's inner reasoning then: "If I feel bad - really bad- then it means that I am bad. And I do not deserve to be loved." This is the internal experience of shame.

What are some of the facets of Russian experience that contribute to the inner motif of shame? First of all, there is the shame of being left alive when so many others have died. There is the shame of powerlessness — of being unable to protect those you love or to bring about any positive change. As individuals,

there is the shame of trusting in a powerful figure (the government or the Party) and being betrayed again and again, leading only to an intense craving for security and safety that goes ever more unmet.

More recently, Russians have also experienced a kind of corporate shame. Once regarded as a super-power, the exposure of the true state of their economy before the world's eyes has been humiliating.

Relating successfully to people in a culture riddled with the effects of shame means that trustworthy relationships are absolutely vital. Trust is built slowly. Russians will feel free to share their personal truth with us as they sense, over a period of time, that we genuinely care about them. And that we respect them. For many Russians, personal interactions are potentially very risky.

The great Russian writer, Dostoyevsky, describes this tension. One of his characters says, "And when he had poured out his heart, he felt ashamed of having shown me his inmost soul like that. So he began to hate me." He is saying that if a person reveals too much, too quickly, or if we pull his protective mask from him, he will feel exposed and perhaps even violated. In the Russian culture, relationships built in an atmosphere of trust are crucial.

Understanding the internal experience of the Russian soul/psyche may help explain some



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*- Dostoyevsky*

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of the extreme reactions and seeming contradictions in the way Russians relate to life. Return, for a moment, to the paradigm of what happens in the experience of abused or abandoned children. There is little in their daily life that is certain. Everything seems tenuous and unpredictable. Promises are made — and never kept. Hopes are raised and then just as quickly, cruelly dashed. A person's inner longings and fears are not affirmed and nurtured. They are exploited.

Out of this background grows the tendency, as adults, to vacillate between extremes and contradictions. For instance, a Russian may appear guarded and distant — as though a thick crust stands between him and everyone else. However, once he feels some safety in the relationship, he might swing to the opposite extreme. One American was surprised to be asked to spend the entire summer at a Russian's family dacha following a simple conversation and the offer of a small gift for her son. The pendulum can swing precariously from merely relating as strangers to the camaraderie reserved for close friends. Conversely, inconsistency in the friendship or disappointment can bring about strong, almost vengeful responses.

Due to the fear of losing the relationship, it may also prove difficult for a Russian to tell you what he honestly thinks and feels. He may say "yes" when all he means is "maybe." He may appear convinced of the message being presented even though he is still mentally weighing the options. He can appear at times demanding, and in other situations, he may find it hard to voice even the simplest of preferences. Such is the nature of the internal ambivalence.

Even in Russian national life, the swing between extremes is apparent: the superpower nation that is unable to deliver citizens with consistent hot water, or a people who value their children and yet use abortion as a means of



birth control. (Although it should be noted that every culture has its list of habits and attitudes that seem inconsistent to outsiders).

Whatever the vacillation in words and behavior in the daily life of the average Russian, whatever the state of the Russian soul/psyche as they turn the corner on this century, one truth is essential. God seems to have equipped the Russians with enormous interpersonal sensitivity. They know when someone sincerely cares about them. They sense it intuitively. Love covers a multitude of sins — and an ocean of language barriers and cultural blunders. Kindness, genuine caring, listening with respect — this is the language of love in Russia.

#### How do Russians view the future?

No individual, or culture, can move forward successfully without hope. Hope is essential to life. The Russian does not look to the same sources of hope that most human beings do. Neither the family or the workplace or the government provide any reason for encouragement. A Russian would rarely think of himself as having any of his own inner resources from which to create a new life. His surest inclination would be to feel that hope comes from the outside. Hope is symbolized by the horizon. It is "out there," beyond the scope of his daily experience.

The average Russian is deeply in touch with his feeling of powerlessness. Most Russians, especially those older than 30, do not see themselves as able to change the course of their lives. This is one reason Russians have been so easily manipulated by western materialism and the cults. Anyone who promises a better life and a quick fix can gain a hearing here.

What does this mean to the Christian who

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comes into the Russian culture with the hope of representing Christ well? First of all, Westerners must avoid at all costs the temptation to fall into the role of the "righteous-rescuer-come-to-save-the-day." Only a strength of humility that continually points to the true Messiah — Jesus Christ — holds out to Russians the promise of a hope that does not fail. The Russian "need to be rescued from outside" has the potential of genuine fulfillment, but in the

person of Christ and the eventual advent of His Kingdom.

In addition to seeing hope as coming from outside their culture, there is one avenue of hope clearly found within the Russian experience. The primary symbol of hope to the Russian soul and culture is children. Children represent the future — a future that might be other than, and better than the past. Children are the only link of substance between Russian men and women. In a child's face, a Russian adult sees his own lost innocence. When presented with the opportunity to hear more about Christianity, many Russian adults will say something like, "It's too late for me, but I want my children to know the truth."

The symbol of children as the door to hope is one that needs to be explored further in reaching Russians. It may be that the Christ Child as the Father's great gift and our true hope sounds a particularly sensitive note to Russian hearts.

## How do Russians view relationships between men and women?

One theme that consistently emerges from surveys and interviews regarding the sexes is this: Russian men and women, at this point in their culture, are quite alienated and isolated from each other. Heterosexual love in Russia has an unusually strong mix of awe and dread. One popular Russian song's lyric reads, "How I love you, how I fear you," referring to the inordinate, almost primal fear that Russian men have of Russian women.

Decades of life under a brutal regime and a mindless bureaucracy have been hard on the men of Russia. Some sources actually go back 170 years to a brutal crushing by the Tsar of the Decembrist rebellion of 1825 as the time when men in Russia began to lose much of their self-esteem and assertiveness. During the Communist years, personal initiative of any sort, could mean a quick trip to Siberia. Russian men have a saying that sums up the dilemma as they saw it: "The tallest blade of grass is the first to be mowed down." The only way to survive was to melt into the faceless, immobile mass of humanity. One must never stand out.

Whatever the historical causes, Russian men and women both agree on a common artifice — a stereotypical image — of the Russian male as an incompetent, defeated bum who is often drunk and rarely reliable. Men appear weak and ineffective; women are seen as strong and resourceful. Bits and pieces of this recurrent theme can be heard in Russian colloquialism. "All men are dogs, but some of them can be trained." Or as one woman replied when asked if she was going to marry the man by whom she had gotten pregnant, "Why would I do that? Then I would have two children to take care of."

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*"All men are dogs, but some of them can be trained."*

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*Russian women are looking for someone to blame; the men willingly line up and volunteer.*

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The tragedies of more recent decades have created a generation of men whom women feel are less mannered and less confident. They have less regard for women and less hope for the future. The sobering

addendum is that the men, themselves, agree with this assessment. While Russian men, through centuries of serfdom and seven decades of dictatorship, never had much opportunity to develop initiative or shoulder responsibility, Russian women have continued to rule over their domestic kingdoms. They have not experienced an equal sense of helplessness. Surveys consistently show, though, that men and women alike in Russia crave respect and human kindness.

The stereotype of a Russian man as a drunken bum is called an artifice because it serves a useful, albeit unfortunate, purpose for both sexes. For men, being seen as a drunken bum becomes a way to deny the shame of their powerlessness and inability to prevent the tragedies of the past century. If you are powerless to prevent your father from being carried off to Siberia or your children from going hungry, then why not retreat into a drunken stupor? At least, that way, you could keep from contributing to the system that held such evil in place.

And for women, seeing men as drunken bums allows them to place the blame elsewhere for all that has gone wrong through the years.

The mutual "conspiracy" fits together so well, one analyst noted, that it is as though women are looking for someone to blame and men willingly line up and volunteer. The most and in many cases, only, vital link between the sexes is their children.

For both sexes, this artifice has been a useful way to cope with the sludge of powerlessness, shame and guilt that has come their way. As with any artifice, though, it is ultimately self-defeating. Russian men are robbed of the true dignity of their masculinity, and Russian women are bereft of the genuine fathers, husbands and leaders they need.

In spite of the competent, hard-working image most Russian women project in this matriarchal culture, their lives have been far from easy. Over the last few decades, women have been called upon to be both producers and reproducers and as such, they have literally worked a double shift. Combined with the regular practice of abortion (the average number of abortions over the course of a woman's reproductive years is 8), women also carry heavy burdens of responsibility and loss.

It is interesting to note the response of one Russian female commentator in the book, *Soviet Women*, when she was asked what kind of woman was needed at this stage in Russian life. "A good [women's] movement would make our women more gentle, restore the sexes to that fine balance they had in Pushkin's time... Look at the Decembrist men — powerful, positive heroes with heroic, strong but gentle wives."

Russian family life is affected by the particular dynamics that exist between men and women. Most Russians report their fathers to be distant and uninvolved, more like silent spectators or absent through alcoholism. Many Russian mothers are overwhelmed with

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the demands of home and job. In many homes, grandmothers provide the real care and nurturing. Marriage, itself, is often devoid of romantic love. Rather, it resembles a liaison made for economic reasons and for producing children.

How can Christians effectively respond to the particular dynamic that exists in Russia between men and women? First of all, we have to acknowledge the distorted way in which men and women often relate to each other in our culture — using competence, performance, or seductiveness to serve self-centered ends.

Secondly, it is important that we affirm the respective masculinity and femininity of both sexes. God bestowed both men and women with value. We need to model what it means, within our own homes, to respect a man — or to love and lead a woman well. Given the need for male leadership in Russia, it is crucial that we affirm Russian men.

Russian men hunger for respect — and there is a genuine and adequate basis for offering them respect. In a world view that did not include God, and where the forces against you and your family were overwhelmingly destructive, turning to alcohol or sustained lethargy was an emotionally consistent response — meaning that Russian men responded to the emotional truth of their predicament. However, this response has not helped them reclaim their dignity.

Due to the estrangement that exists between the sexes in Russia, it may be better to approach them in separate groups, at least initially.

### **How do Russians process life?**

- **The Logic of Power.** Years of living in a society torn between those who had power and those who did not have made Russians deeply sensitive to the question of power. This lust for power dates back many centuries in Russian

history, even to the time of the Tatars. A. Schmemmann, a noted historian says,

*"The Russian character was completely coarsened...by Tatarism [which is] a lack of principle and a repulsive combination of prostration before the strong with oppression of every thing weak. As Moscow began to rise to dominance, this quality became imprinted more deeply in its culture and the strong religious nationalism of "Holy Russia."*

In everyday life, what happens is often decided not by principle or reason, but on the basis of who's in charge. Who has the power to control the situation? This is always the crucial question. An individual tends to garner respect on the basis of how much power belongs to him. The idea is that if a person adds to his power base — to the factors and people he can control — then he adds to his own existence. He is "real" if he has a lot of power. It seems as though he does not exist if he is perceived as weak and powerless.

- **Nationalism and Mother Russia.** Over and over the theme of national pride emerges from the responses of Russians. They have a deep appreciation for all that is truly Russian: the great Russian winter, the Russian spirit of endurance and outlasting any opponent, a rich artistic heritage, a willingness to sacrifice for "Mother Russia." This indomitable spirit is what Russians see as the reason why they have been able to endure despite all odds. They often refer to the Great Patriotic War (World War II) as an example of Russian heroism and world contribution.

- **The Collective We.** Westerners sometimes make the mistake of associating Russians with a European mindset. In such an outlook, logic reigns. One truth leads to the

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*The best avenue to reach the mind and the will of Russians is through their heart and emotions.*

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next which leads to the next. Everything proceeds in a rational manner from a logical, linear set of presuppositions. Russians are, in actuality, more Asian in their mindset. As such, they are more intuitive. They rely less on logic and more on what they sense or perceive in order to arrive at truth.

Russians are also quite oriented to the macro, broader picture of life. Their questions are not as personal: How does this affect me? Which option would I prefer? How can my needs be met? Russians are particularly attuned to the big questions, the "collective we" questions. They want to know the overview of human and Biblical history, of macro-economics, and the purpose of life and society. Christianity has to make sense to them on a societal scale, not just as personal one. Russians are hungry for a worldview that provides stability and enduring values.

- **Russian Learning Styles.** The best avenue to reach the mind and will of Russians is through their heart, their emotions. Story-telling, poetry, drama, art — these are some of the vehicles that speak most clearly in this culture. Visual art, especially, seems to be the expression of their aesthetic values. In whatever manner it is presented, truth should touch their emotions in order to be deeply received.

Russians are accustomed to learning through the printed page and by observing life. They are voracious readers; they read in order to learn. Small groups, focused on common reading material, can be used in this culture as an effective vehicle for learning and personal change, although establishing sufficient interpersonal trust is the challenge to be met.

Teaching systematic concepts in a Russian culture is best done by providing a sufficient overview or synthesis from which to relate smaller, more detailed points. Their high degree



of literacy and their capacity for conceptual understanding makes Russians rather sophisticated thinkers.

- **Romantic Mystics at Heart.** Beauty, art, mystery — these are values near and dear to the Russian soul. Artists and writers are almost like 'gods' in Russian society. Words and ideas, rather than actions, are the important reality for most Russians. "To talk is enough," is a Russian expression that captures this emphasis on ideas. Russians may be one of the few cultures that has a whole class of people — "intelligentsia" — whose acknowledged contribution was simply to think and reflect on various ideas.

Like modern day Athenians, many Russians have attended Western religious meetings out of an intellectual curiosity to consider this "new" idea being put forth. Committing themselves to Christ is different, however, from listening and discussing theological ideas. One Russian commented that cults make easy inroads in Russia because they do not ask for the whole person the way that Jesus does. It may also take longer for the average Russian to see that embracing Christianity means embracing a different way of life - new behaviors, new attitudes, new actions.

The open-ended mystical quality of Russian thinking also allows baffling contradictions in thought to be held almost simultaneously. Kindness and cruelty, order and disorder, being independent and dependent, regarding power while choosing powerlessness, beauty and ugliness — these are only a few of the paradoxical contrasts that characterize the internal world of Russians.

The result is sometimes an almost paralyzing ambivalence. At best, this ambivalence allows for "mystery" and a variety of options. At its worst, swinging capriciously between

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such varying poles of thought and behavior can border on personal, inner chaos. Being strung between internal contradictions and paralyzing extremes, however, is deemed an integral part of feeling Russian.

### **How does Russian Orthodoxy influence the life of the average secularized Russian?**

Westerners have observed, "If you scratch even a secular Russian, he bleeds Orthodoxy." To the secularized Russian, Orthodoxy represents the undeniable evidence of God's historical presence in his country. Ever since Vladimir was baptized in 980, since St. Sergei's blessing defeated the Mongols, since the tsars located a monastery near each capital — every Russian has known that God is involved with Russia.

Today Russians state their understanding of current events this way: "We threw God out of Russia in 1917. He is now purifying us through suffering. After we have suffered enough, Christ will be reborn into Russian society." Many Russians verbalize their awareness that God is doing something special in Russia and their suffering is the proof that God wants them to turn to Him. Orthodoxy is seen as Russia's evidence of God's existence. As long as there is Russia, there will be Orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy expresses the Russian soul, even for the secular Russian. The lofty architecture, the mournful chanting, the stunning icons, the other-worldly incense — all of these pull at Russians in a distinctly Russian way. Orthodoxy overpowers all the senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste. A person feels God in an Orthodox church, more than he understands Him. For the Russian, every simple church building puts rationality in its place and reminds him, believer or secular, that mystery

rules life. Yet this reminder also tends to tear the Russian soul in half. To the average Russian, educated in the philosophy of the enlightenment, the questions of life should have some



rational explanation. Orthodoxy has never offered rational answers to the questions of honest men. One of the most popular Orthodox priests was a Muscovite named Alexander Men, who dared to offer rational answers to religious questions. Most educated Russians feel required to leave their intellectual faculties outside the door when entering the Orthodox world. Orthodoxy asserts that mystery reigns supreme, an often painful disappointment for the educated Russian in search of some clear guidelines for life.

Though many Russians search for religious answers to life's dilemmas, they are skeptical of Westerners who demonstrate absolute certainty about God. While the Western theologian may seek Biblical precision as a way of understanding God, the Russian tends to seek God with the soul, in a domain other than the logic of the mind. In the soul, only beauty is a sufficient medium to the Divine mystery. To the Russian, the intellect is not the preferred tool to know God. Mystery, beauty, soulish wonder — these are seen as the avenues to God.

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Orthodoxy is viewed by the secular Russian as the starting place in his search for God. Though riddled with compromise and irrationality, though often more worldly than spiritual, Orthodoxy still has been Russia's historical gateway to God. The average Russian's background tells him that God is the God of Orthodoxy, and Orthodoxy is the best description of God.

### How do Russians tend to view God?

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***"Christianity, if practiced in the ideal, seems especially suited to the Russian character."***

***Robert Massie***

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On the whole, Russians surveyed in all adult age groups have shown that they look at God as an abstract concept. He appears unknowable, enigmatic and mysterious. Most Russians tend to see him as remote and unwilling to intervene in the terrible events that have happened to them. His involvement is more that of a Celestial Judge who dispenses rewards and punishment to those below. They are like children who have been beaten and cower when approaching the master or parent, not knowing when the next blow will fall.

Positive images of God are overwhelmingly linked with pictures of children and babies as a visual representation of innocence and love.

When relating concepts about God to Russians, it is wise to guard against the idea of worshipping God through nature. Nature, in Russia, has the brutal strength of the great Russian bear - it denotes beauty and power. Nature is also closely linked with the senseless cruelty and powerfully destructive forces too reminiscent of the times in which they've lived. It is seen as having the power to devour them.

In Robert Massie's book, *Peter the Great*, he notes: "Christianity, if practiced in the ideal, seems especially suited to the Russian character. Russians are preeminently a pious, compassionate and humble people, accepting faith as more powerful than logic and believing that life is

controlled by superhuman forces, be they spiritual, autocratic or even occult. Russians feel far less need than most pragmatic Westerners to inquire why things happen, or how they can be made to happen (or not happen) again. Disasters occur and they accept; orders are issued and they obey. This is something other than brute docility. It stems rather from a sense of the natural rhythms of life. Russians are contemplative, mystical and visionary. From their observations and meditations, they have produced an understanding of suffering and death which gives a meaning to life not unlike that affirmed by Christ."

#### What can we learn from Russians?

- **Endurance.** Russians know that life is difficult. They accept suffering as an inescapable part of the human condition. Having withstood Napoleon and Hitler's advances, Stalin's purging, and the great Russian winters, Russians are admirable for having simply endured. They have made it this far by sheer resilience and forcing themselves to keep going, no matter what the obstacles. They have much to teach us about living with hardship, about enduring.

- **An Ability to Consider Societal, Rather than Individual, Implications.**

In the West, we tend to think, "What's in this for me?" We ask the question, "What are my rights?" Russians have been reared to consider the needs of the nation, of the group, to be more important than their personal needs. In the effort to bring better balance between the needs of the group and the rights of the individual, Russians help us understand the welfare of the group.

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*"Russians have ... an understanding of suffering and death which gives a meaning to life not unlike that affirmed by Christ."*

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*Russians resist well the temptation to reduce God to a collection of spiritual formulas to master.*

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- **An Appreciation for the Beauty and Mystery of God.**

Russians are naturally much closer to the truth of the Psalms: "God is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence." The interior of a Russian Orthodox church reveals the high premium they place on visual beauty. Hundreds of years ago, painting Bible stories on the walls was a way of teaching an illiterate peasantry the truths of the gospel. Even more recently, one Christian organization begun by Russian nationals, toured with a traveling art show of 45 works of Christian art to cities that had no church. Tour guides explained the gospel through the paintings. Twenty-four churches were started as the result of this traveling art show. Where else would there be so deep an appreciation for the combination of beauty and God?

Russians resist well the temptation to reduce God to a collection of spiritual formulas to master. They recognize a level of mystery and awe that makes the only sane response one of worship. The Psalmist's words could well be Russian: "Worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness."

- **Humility.** Russians model a sense of humility that recognizes the limitations of being human. We cannot know all the answers with absolute certainty — even with all that has been revealed to us in the Scriptures, we remain like children in our understanding of God and His ways. The Russian teaches us to accept that uncertainty is always present in some measure, that indeed, we "see through a glass darkly."

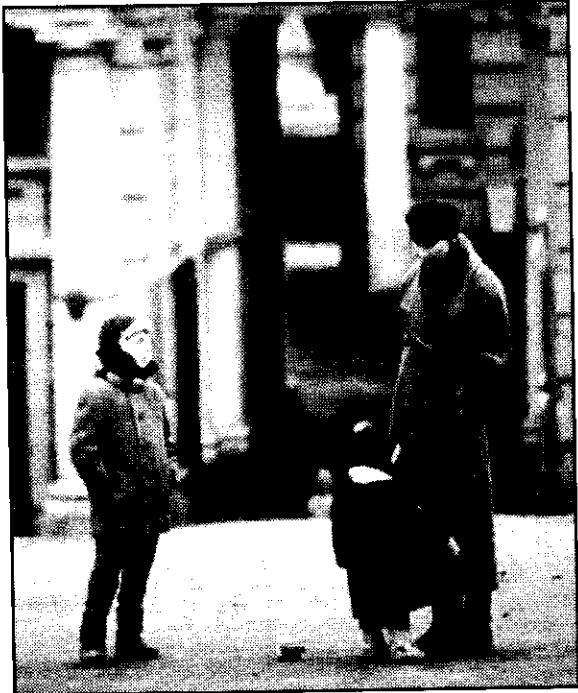
What cautions should you keep in mind? Remember that every Russian is an individual who is shaped by his or her own past and family influences. There is always a danger of over-generalizing. In the West, for instance, we speak of the disillusionment of the baby boom generation.. Yet, many in that same generation would

not feel that disillusionment characterized their experience.

It is also important, in talking to Russians, to take into account their age and background. Those between the ages of 20 and 35 will have grown up with more freedom, more hope and less trauma. Developmentally, they will be looking more to the possibilities of the present than the losses or regrets of the past. The past belongs to their grandparents and great-grandparents — and it may be too overwhelming to look at that.

Russians can easily feel intimidated or even humiliated by Americans. They have been told since the 1920's that they would surpass us in every way. Until western TV came into Russia on a large scale, they believed they had.

Beware, too, of the pride of suggesting a final, certain answer to all questions asked of you. Not knowing the full, complete answer will not undermine your credibility with a Russian. It is entirely permissible to a Russian for you to admit the places where you yourself are still seeking to understand. In other words, try to be clear about the truths the Bible presents as certain because God has revealed them (such as the deity of Christ, the sufficiency of his death, etc.) while allowing for the presence of mystery, or all we do not know, because of our finiteness.



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**How does an understanding of the Russian soul influence the way you relate to Russians?**

First of all, we need to empathize; to feel for them. We need to let ourselves be moved by their losses, their struggles, by all that they have painfully endured through the years. Many of them may never put that struggle into words. They have made it this far by focusing on what lies immediately before them. If their pain does come to the surface, it is important not to back away. Communicate that you are able and willing to hear whatever they need to share.

It is probably impossible to overemphasize the importance of listening in this culture. Most missionaries come with a message; they enter a room talking. However, surveys of Russians consistently show that their greatest need is to be understood, second only to their desire to be rescued from the outside. They long for someone to listen as though they have something important to say.

Consistency is another key word in relating to Russians. It is important not to make promises that you may not be able to keep. The Scriptural admonition to "Let your yes be yes and your no be no" applies well in this culture. Inconsistency and disappointment in relationships are apt to be interpreted as another form of abandonment.

The Russian need to "be rescued from the outside" presents a vexing dilemma to foreigners coming in to minister. The question becomes, what kind of helping is truly helpful? To allow yourself to be cast as a savior, a western repository of power and wisdom, will ultimately become a roadblock to Russians whose need is to discover their own resources and security in the heart of



God. You can guard against that by assuming the humble position of recognizing where Russians have much to teach all of us. You can make clear your own human need of the true Savior, by sharing the weak and vulnerable places in your life where the Lord has met and is meeting you.

Finally, remember that genuine expressions of kindness, respect, and love are what Russians have experienced so little of through the years, and it is what they long for now. St. Francis of Assisi's words apply here. He said, "Preach Jesus... and only when necessary use words." Russians need to see models of Christlikeness. They need to feel the love of Christ through your words and actions toward them — **through your life.**

*"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth...love one another deeply, from the heart." (1 Peter 1:22)*

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words."*

*Francis of Assisi*

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## The Russian Leadership Development Team Authors and Contributors

Ralph Ennis is Director of Training Curriculum for the CoMission. He served as senior researcher and ideological spearhead for the Russian Leadership Development Team. He has authored **CROSSwalk**, a discipleship program adapted for use in the former Soviet Union, and *Ordinary Man*, a contextualized gospel presentation for Russians.

Jennifer Ennis is a psychiatric nurse who has taught Russian medical personnel on family systems and alcoholism. With her husband, she has recently written *Biblical Foundations of Parenting*, especially for use in Russia. She also served as a researcher and interviewer for the Leadership Effort. Ralph and Jen recently spent a year living in Moscow with three of their four children.

Paula Rinehart, M.S.W., has published several books of both sociological and psychological interest. Paula served as the writing coordinator for this project on the Russian soul.

Eddie Broussard lives in Moscow and is the In-Country Coordinator for the Russian Leadership Development Team. This effort is designed to help understand the process of developing godly Russian leaders, and how expatriate laypeople can be a part. Eddie has ministered in four cultures and speaks three languages. He has a Masters in New Testament from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

John Hamilton, a trainer for the CoMission, specializes in helping Russians study the Bible in small groups. He learned about the culture firsthand while living with a Russian family in St. Petersburg. From his extensive reading and personal interviews, he supplied the basis for the vignette and thoughts on the Russian Orthodox Church.

Dr. Stacy Rinehart serves as the Executive Director of the Training and Materials Committee for the CoMission and Director for the Russian Leadership Development Team.

Michael Sack is the President and Founder of Quali-Quant Research. In October 1993, he conducted a visual discrimination survey in Vladimir, Russia. This survey was designed to help understand the Russian soul/psyche. Michael holds a law degree and is an ethnographer. He has worked in more than 30 cultures.

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