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SURVIVING ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IN RUSSIA
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Executive Summary:

Working class and lower-income people in urban Russia, facing steady declines in the standard of living over the past decade, use a variety of strategies for coping with limited resources: many of these are similar to those employed in the Soviet period. In the first place among these strategies is the interdependence of relatives, friends, and colleagues in terms of a range of forms of mutual assistance. Second, people cope by maintaining patterns of frugality developed over a lifetime. Third, the domestic production of foodstuffs (especially via dacha gardening) provides a crucial margin of security. Fourth, people seek part-time, night-time, or weekend work, or enroll in marketing schemes to try to make extra money. Reliance on other practices such as food hoarding, utilization of social benefits and discounts, collective pilfering from the workplace, and so on — remain fairly common. This paper, based on ethnographic interviews and participant observation, depicts the situation of the economically struggling, which may be the majority of the population, in Russia today. While it focuses on the material practices of accommodation to contemporary conditions, it also depicts some of the cultural terms through which people conceptualize their situations; these too are key strategies in the processes of accommodation.

The Russian State Statistics Committee reported in January, 1997 that 22.4% of the population earned below the subsistence level, 400,000 rubles ($70) per month, while the average per capita income hovered around 800,000 rubles ($147) per month. The cost of living in Moscow (by certain gauges) is among the highest in the world, and costs in other large cities in Russia are also relatively high (food prices in cities North or East of Moscow are higher). How do people survive under such conditions? Through ethnographic interviews and participant observation, I have tried to understand not only the material but also the socio-cultural means by which people cope with such hard times. Below I give a very general outline of these strategies.

I. Pooled Resources and Interdependence

Throughout the Soviet period, housing was the scarcest commodity, and unless they had very powerful connections, people waited in line for decades for apartments. This meant that extended families often lived together, with married children and their offspring sharing cramped quarters with one set of parents. That often painful experience is still necessitated, now by plain economics rather than Soviet distribution practices. By combining the pensions and incomes of several generations,
people can maximize their economic resources. Families living together benefit also from having different sources of income, some which may be more dependable than others. In many cases, young married couples who got their own apartments in the late Soviet period have even moved back into their parents’ apartments, in order to rent out the second apartment; the income from a rented apartment can often exceed the combined pensions and salaries of all of the family members (this is especially common in Moscow since there is great demand for rental apartments). There can be a stark economic gulf between those extended families which managed to acquire (and privatize) apartments for the second generation in the late Soviet years and those who did not quite succeed in doing so. This is especially true when pensions and salaries are late. Though it can be risky renting an apartment, the income may nonetheless be more stable and several times greater than that from pensions or salaries. Some people decide to sell off their second apartments, but this is seen as risky from the standpoint of the possibility of being swindled, and most people feel the security of owning property outweighs the benefits of cash.

Foodstuffs represent the largest part of an average family’s budget, but people save in several ways when several generations live together. Elderly people may consume less, thus leaving more for the younger. Pensioners are free to spend the bulk of their time at the dacha during warm months, and can thus produce and preserve vegetables, fruits, mushrooms, and other foodstuffs (most extended families have some access to a dacha). “Grandmothers” can spend time (and have the skills) for more careful shopping and “cooking from scratch” thus also stretching the food budget. Standing in line has hardly disappeared from the cities of Russia since Soviet times; certain basic commodities such as milk, eggs, sugar, bread and so on are still sold a bit more cheaply from kolkhoz or government outlets and people will stand in line to buy these foods in bulk quantities and thus save small amounts. This is uncommon in Moscow, but is still standard in provincial cities.

Aside from pooling resources by shared housing, relatives, friends and colleagues help each other in a host of other ways. This mutual interdependence is familiar because of the complex Soviet networks of shared access, favors, and procurement, but at present it is much more centered on monetary help (less common during Soviet times). People are starkly aware of their relative prosperity vis-à-vis others, and of the contingent nature of their prosperity (in several senses) and thus try to help others close in their networks of kin, friends, and colleagues, particularly those with children. This help most commonly takes the form of foodstuffs, especially those which will keep for a long time; people frequently send or bring food to relatives, friends, former colleagues or teachers.

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2 In Moscow, Yaroslavl, and Tver, I have observed a variety of combinations of extended families sharing domiciles, including one or both parents living with one or more married couples of the second generation, childless or with children; widowed mothers or fathers living with their married, divorced, or unmarried children, with or without a third generation; elderly or middle aged siblings living together (with or without spouses); I know one case where four generations live in a two room apartment: mother, daughter, granddaughter, granddaughter’s husband, and their three year-old son. In this case, with one pension and three incomes, they are saving to purchase a second apartment.
in other regions, which they know to be less well off. People often contribute home-made, dacha produce, or bulk purchased fruits or grains, kolbasa, dairy products, as well as used or new clothing, toys or books for children, or other necessary but inaccessible goods. Less commonly, help may take the form of monetary gifts (often left discretely in envelopes, tucked in people's purses or left at their apartments after a visit, to avoid shaming someone; there is general cultural avoidance of monetary exchange between close kin or friends). Someone may pay or contribute towards paying for some particular thing someone else needs but can't afford: especially medicine, tuition for schooling, transportation costs, etc.; this can often be done indirectly so as to avoid mutual embarrassment. On certain occasions, monetary collections are taken up in workplaces to help someone in need; this is especially the case when someone needs sudden medical care (only the most basic part of which is still covered by the medical benefits system) or when someone dies. As in the Soviet period, in the latter case workplace colleagues, neighbors, and friends often chip in, voluntarily, to cover funeral costs, which can be over $1000.3

Monetary loans have become much more common, and they are often made by people who are receiving salaries regularly to those who are not, or on occasions when a family needs a large sum which they can't possibly accumulate (for some kind of educational needs, because of some sudden household problem or catastrophe, or because there arises an opportunity to make money which needs a small amount of capital). There has always been a strong disdain towards borrowing and lending money, and people speak of how terrifying it is to be in the position of having to ask to borrow, given that repayment will be quite difficult. In general, the spirit of mutual help can be summed up by the comment of a teacher in Moscow: "We are beyond poor, we are destitute. But if the poor don't help one another, who will?"

II. Frugality and Domestic Budgeting

Since housing and energy costs are still largely subsidized throughout Russia, they represent only a small part of household budgets.4 Foodstuffs are the largest category of expenditure. People economize by purchasing only locally-produced foods and by sticking to the most basic, traditional Russian diet: bread, potatoes, grains, a limited range of dairy products, fruits and vegetables largely from their own dacha gardens, which they preserve for winter use, and tea. Meat consumption is far more limited than it was in Soviet years, and consists mainly of kolbasa and sausages. As a variety of statistical surveys in the past years have shown, in general calorie consumption is down, and the

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3 In one recent case, the colleagues of a woman whose father died of kidney failure paid not only for his funeral costs but also for the room in her apartment, in which the father had lain bedridden for several years, to be refurbished with new flooring, wallpaper, and paint. This case is slightly special, however, since the woman worked at a successful advertising firm in Moscow, where incomes were generally two times higher than the average.

4 In industrial cities where hardship is the most extreme, where the vast majority of the population goes for months without receiving their pay, people simply don't pay for their apartments, their energy use, or their transport, since there is quite literally nothing with which to pay.
quality of foods consumed has also diminished. While stores may feature imported goods, for people in the lowest and "average" income categories these are so far beyond their budgets that they don't even glance at these products. Nor do they purchase foods in cafes, fast-food outlets, or even their workplace buffets (as they might have in Soviet years). The situation with provisioning is, naturally, the hardest for people to bear. To give a sense of this, one single mother of a teenager in Moscow commented, "my daughter is growing so fast, she is always hungry. All I can afford to feed her is potatoes." A woman in Cheliabinsk, who has a salary on top of her pension, and no children of her own to support, helps her friends as much as possible; said she found it terrifying to hear her fellow teachers complaining that their children eat too much, ("whereas before they might complain it was hard to get their children to eat"). A single mother of two girls in Moscow said "we get by on my salary (as a kiosk seller); it's good that I have gotten used to not eating during the day."

Regular medical care is beyond many people's access, since at state-run clinics, only the most rudimentary services can be provided; people have to provide (and locate) many of their own medicines and supplies, and the staff — themselves paid only slightly more than the "average" salary, when they actually receive their wages — depend a lot on "gifts" which patients can give to acquire more extensive treatment. For the most part, people rely on home remedies for many ailments, and the medical treatment in clinics is often merely an extension of these remedies. A dentist in Tver' reported to me that most people treat tooth problems at home, since they can't afford private clinics and the public clinics are so underfunded they can provide almost no care; this home treatment more often than not involves extracting decayed teeth.6

New clothing purchases are made with great consideration. For many, the only new items they purchase are shoes and coats for children (if they don't get these through hand-me-downs from friends and relatives). People put money aside for months in order to buy some necessary item, and often depend on loans from kin or friends if they desperately need to purchase something.

Entertainments and cultural opportunities are out of the range of most families' budgets. Many people no longer subscribe to or purchase newspapers, magazines, journals, or books. Theater,

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5The situation of medical workers is clear through the following examples. A specialist in children's pulmonary diseases in Moscow, whose husband is a struggling, but moderately successful entrepreneur, has taken "unpaid leave" from her job because it pays less than $157 (one million rubles) per month, salaries are always late, and it is less stressful for the family if she spends the summer at the dacha growing vegetables. A medic, who provides ambulance service outside of Moscow, also earns less than $157 per month, but often encounters starving people (especially elderly) on his rounds, and provides them with bits of food and money; his spouse is a successful translator and they scrape together small amounts when necessary to help a patient. The medic says he doesn't quit his work because he sees it as "his calling in life."

6This dentist opened his own private, western-style clinic in Tver in 1993. He recently attempted to unite with the public clinic to found an insurance organization (a kind of dental HMO) which would allow people of all income categories to access dental treatment, and which would simultaneously improve the financial situation for the clinic, which, he said, is practically non-functioning due to lack of funds. Its directorship rejected that idea as too complicated. He told me that although their staff of 100 or so sits in the clinic without necessary equipment or materials, receiving minuscule salaries, the directors have built fancy new homes and travel extensively.
movie, concert, and museum tickets are well beyond reach. Television, radio, and record or tape players, and free public festivals take the place of those other forms of diversion. Where the majority of people could usually find some funds (or workplace support) for a brief summer trip to the sea (considered a necessary form of rest by most Russians, and generally not very costly), now this is out of the question.

Social life and connections have diminished, because of family budget restraints, a factor often overlooked. Although it was standard in the Soviet period to entertain friends on birthdays and other special occasions, now those days are seen as terrific financial burdens, and people often try to avoid celebrating them. General visiting has declined drastically, since people can’t put a good table together. Inter-city phone calls are too expensive, as is inter-city travel to visit relatives or friends. Even the postage for a letter was mentioned to me by one pensioner as "an extra" expense, to be contemplated.

The costs of higher education for young people is a serious problem. Fewer and fewer places are reserved in state-funded universities and institutes for those who cannot pay either "official" tuition (in the thousands of dollars) or the unofficial cost for "tutoring" from faculty, a year of which guarantees admission to a given program. At present, this can cost up to $20,000 (to get into certain disciplines at Moscow State University); costs (either "official" or "unofficial") are lower for less prestigious schools, and for schools in other cities. While many young people want to enroll in business schools, these all charge tuitions of at least $1000 per year and usually considerably more. The opportunities for young people out of school (whether in education or commerce) are diverse, whereas in smaller cities many young people told me they felt the only real opportunities were being offered by mafia organizations.

III. Provisioning through Dacha Gardens

About 30% of urban Russians have dachas, according to most surveys. This makes the dacha garden and related activities a factor in the provisioning for a significant number of families. Conditions are often difficult, for most dachas don’t have running water, and they are often difficult to access, involving complicated and extensive travel by train and bus. Nonetheless, people rely on what they can produce at the dacha, both physically and psychologically. Although in real terms, they may not produce all that much, the dacha garden seems to provide many with a distinct sense of security; "whatever happens" people imagine they will somehow survive through their own efforts. Although in Soviet times, people tended to focus on planting tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs, and other seasonal crops, in recent years they have focused more on potatoes, cabbage, and large Russian squashes, since these can keep into the winter and spring with careful handling. Apples and other fruits, as well as berries (both domesticated and wild) and mushrooms hunted in the forest are fervently cultivated, gathered and processed.
In recent years, the rising cost of transportation to and from the dacha, and the costs of seed and plant stocks has put a dent in the profitability of dacha activity for many. A number of people in Moscow, Tver, and Yaroslavl, as well as others from other Russian cities have commented that although they are loathe to give up their dacha activity, for many the summer months can better be spent trying to earn extra money in whatever ways possible in the cities.

IV. Alternative Income Opportunities

There are a few standard ways in which people make money to supplement low (or unpaid) wages or pensions. Many of these involve some kind of marketing; few pay very much. Although such activities are most common in Moscow, they are also prevalent in other cities. One surprising factor is the speed with which various selling practices have become "organized" — i.e. come under the centralized control of "businessmen" (primarily mafia-related).

The years 1991-1994 saw the phenomenal growth in Russian cities of "tolkuchki" — literally "little crowds" — areas around train stations and metro stations, and in the squares in front of large stores, where older women (primarily) stood in neat lines hawking a variety of goods. Around train and metro stations these goods were primarily vodka, beer, cigarettes, bread, dried fish, boiled eggs or potatoes and other snacks, and newspapers. In front of stores, people usually sold the same types of goods sold inside the stores: dresses, sweaters, scarves, shoes, small electrical goods, books, and so on.7 The city police made occasional raids to clear away the tolkuchki, and the benefit of selling like this is the ease with which one could rapidly pack up ones small cache of goods and flee. The sellers were basically "speculators" — purchasing goods in state stores or from factories in one area and selling them for more in another area where busy travelers or shoppers were apt to buy them.

By the mid-1990s, this variety of selling had become more "rationalized" and organized, so that instead of buying cigarettes, alcohol, items of clothing, newspapers, etc. in a far-out shop, the older women buy at a discount from central "distributors"; the cost of "space" in these tolkuchki has become rationalized as well, with payoffs flowing in controlled ways through "businessmen" and city police. Selling cigarettes, for example, in this manner, a woman can earn as much as fifty thousand rubles ($8.77) per day, far more than provided by a pension.

Other people (usually younger people, not pensioners) work as hired salespeople in "wholesale markets," street stands, and kiosks; a good daily wage for selling in this way also seems to be around 50,000 rubles. Sellers are often former factory workers, technicians, teachers, and others, and they have come either from closed enterprises, or have taken leave from or completely quit jobs which pay insufficient wages. Many people come from provincial cities and towns, and from Ukraine for periods of time to do this kind of selling; as one woman from the Donbass coal mining

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7Some "tolkuchki" were remarkably specialized; so, for instance, in front of a "radio hobbyist" shop, men sold various transistors, circuit boards, and similar parts.
region told me. She earns more in one day than she can in an entire month at home — although coming to Moscow to sell means leaving her two daughters behind with relatives. Her entire extended family, however, benefits from this activity, as they are basically living in a barter economy and small amounts of cash make a big difference in their ability to purchase food.

Some people also sell foods which they have produced at their dachas, but this invariably means paying the mafia and/or the police some percentage for occupying a space whether outside a rail station, metro station, in an underground passageway, or in front of a store. Here again, organized "distributors" often provide the goods, which appear to be from someone's dacha but are actually procured from vegetable or fruit markets.

The poorest people, with no "capital" to invest in commodities to sell on the street, sometimes try to sell used goods in random places throughout the city: a person will sit with a small cloth spread on the ground, trying to sell some used shoes, books, household tools, or other small items. There are also some central gathering spots for such selling. Though local inhabitants don't like it (often drunks and homeless people try to sell in this way), these "vendors" are so destitute they seem to be left alone by the mafia.

The suburban trains ("elektrichki") are key points for selling small items, often tools for crafts or home improvement, "consecrated" candles and other religious objects, chocolate, newspapers, magazines, and books. According to media reports, sellers work in bands called "professional organizations" which are clearly run by mafia groups. Sellers pay off the police to allow them to sell in the trains.

Pyramid marketing schemes have already grown into a large "industry" in Russia, and inducements to take part in these appear constantly as "help wanted" ads in newspapers, are handed out as leaflets in the streets, are dropped in mailboxes or pasted on walls and lightpoles. They invariably advertise enormous salaries, from $500 to $2000 per month, for people with "energy" (no qualifications necessary). One woman searching for work called every job ad in a newspaper, and all but one turned out to be some kind of marketing opportunity; the one exception was offering a job as a "dispatcher" for prostitutes, which my acquaintance actually took. Pyramid marketers typically purchase $100 to $500 worth of goods — weight loss products, cosmetics, miracle cleaning agents, long distance phone hookups, "at wholesale prices" which they then have to sell through telephone marketing; as is standard with pyramid marketing schemes, sellers earn less through actual sales of the product than they do through recruiting new marketers who purchase the start-up kit.

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8This woman commented on the fact that most of the clothing she sells as an employee of another woman at the "wholesale" market is counterfeit in some way. She told me about a cache of shirts she was supposed to sell: "the label in the collar said 'made in France,' the label in the seam said 'made in Korea' and the label on the plastic wrapping said 'made in Italy'. My boss said to tear off the 'made in Korea' and 'made in Italy' labels." She remarked how difficult it was at times to sell such fraudulent goods to unsuspecting people, "especially pensioners and young girls, who think they are getting a bargain, buying a coat which will fall apart in a week."
Even despite the calamitous collapse of the infamous MMM marketing scheme, many people remain vulnerable to these programs, which promise them they can become entrepreneurs.

Aside from selling, there are several standard jobs which people take to supplement incomes or pensions (since 1993 it has been legal for pensioners to earn money on top of their pensions). The most common for men is to work as (unarmed) guards or night watchmen — in stores, factories, public facilities, parking lots, warehouses, and so on. The pay is minimal, often less than $100 per month. Other people, especially pensioners, work as "dezhurnye" — sitting at the entrances to public buildings and offices; occasionally they combine this work with "selling" — i.e. displaying a few journals, videocassettes, stationary goods, items of clothing etc. for sale. Some people take second jobs cleaning — often working in their own apartment buildings cleaning the entryways, elevators, stairs, and sidewalks; this job is harder in the winter when it involves clearing snow, but it is convenient in that it can be scheduled around a primary full-time job, and doesn't involve extra transportation costs.

People of course rely on their professional skills (teaching, music, medicine, technical, etc.) to provide income on the side, wherever possible.

V. Discounts and Social Benefits, Pilfering, Hoarding

People make extensive use of whatever social and professional benefits they are entitled to, and as long as these remain in place, they make a big difference in the ability of people to get by. Among the most important are the subsidies on housing (average monthly payments for apartments are around $20 per month; pensioners pay approximately half) and energy (most people cited paying around $2-5 per month for electricity, and a similar amount for heat, water, garbage and other "communal services" combined). Subsidies keep the cost of public transportation quite low; one trip in the Moscow Metro or on buses, as of July, 1997, was 2000 rubles (35 cents); it is about half that in provincial cities. Pensioners, military personnel, transportation workers, and invalids ride for free. Even though it costs so little, however, many working people complain that transport remains one of their major family expenditures, and when the cost goes up, as it did in July, 1997, the effects are felt on family budgets. The continuing subsidies for day-care are an important benefit for parents, especially single mothers. Still in place are the "overnight" child-care centers (which keep pre-school children from Monday morning through Friday evening), which allow people to work evening or night shifts, and which help cut down on the cost of feeding a family.

As in the Soviet period, the workplace may provide access to commodities which are otherwise inaccessible. One man remarked that his family cannot afford to buy meat, but his wife works as the director of a cafeteria, and regularly manages to bring pieces of meat home for the family. At a soup kitchen (situated in a regular cafeteria) where I worked for a period of time, I observed the staff organizing among themselves small bundles of leftover food to take home. Most people were loathe to talk about this kind of practice, though they occasionally describe how their acquaintances rely on
such access. Foodstuffs may be brought home for the family, and other goods may be pilfered to sell for cash; construction materials were cited several times in this regard. Aside from pilfering, factories often pay their workers in goods rather than cash; workers then face the task of finding ways to resell those goods.

Food hoarding provides a margin of security in hard times. People may hoard both foods purchased in bulk, as well as foods processed at the dacha. A very significant detail in regards to hoarding which came up in conversations with people from Tver and Cheliabinsk is that grains and soap purchased with talons in the early 1990s are now running out. In 1990 and 1991, when drastic shortages were common, people received coupons for basic supplies, and having plenty of cash at the time, they purchased everything they were entitled to. This resulted in many families laying by large stores of buckwheat groats, vermicelli, rice, millet, sugar, tea, and soap. Because of the difficult financial situation of the past two years, those stocks are now being used up. This fact may represent a turning point in people's ability to get by, both materially and psychologically.

The number of beggars have proliferated throughout Russia in the past years, and public places are full of elderly persons and invalids soliciting handouts. Recent media reports have exposed the fact that most beggars are "controlled" by mafia groups, which assign locations, provide some protection or assistance to disabled beggars, and collect the larger portion of the proceeds.

VI. Cultural coping mechanisms

This section explores the socio-cultural mechanisms which help people tolerate the difficult economic conditions in contemporary Russia. These mechanisms are every bit as important as material coping strategies; the maintenance of social order depends to a great extent on people interpreting their predicament in cultural terms, colluding in the construction of a worldview which accommodates and makes sense of the most acute hardships. As with the material in the prior section, the material included here is a composite derived from interviews and observation.

The extensiveness of hardship in Russia today is foremost among the factors which compels people, in a sense, to accept it. This may seem an obvious point: but its implications are significant. Hardship is seen as almost a fact of nature; the chaotic dismantling of the Soviet industrial system, the ubiquitous corruption, the enrichment of the elites at the expense of "the people" — these are spoken of almost as inevitable phenomena, against which there is no contest.

In almost every interview, people cast this inevitability in terms of fatalistic comments about Russia, saying things like "it has always been like this in Russia," "this is Russia, what do you want." One man took this a step farther, saying — with only a little irony — "the mission of Russia is, always has been, and always will be to show the rest of the world how not to live." The overall conception of Russia is as a place where everything which can go wrong goes wrong, where the powerful will always enrich themselves at the expense of the people, and thus "what can one do
except try to get by, survive?" With these sentiments as a "background chorus" to daily struggle, people learn to expect little except more difficulty, new layers of hardship.

It might be argued that this "fatalism" is harmful in that it curbs potentially beneficial social protest, and may even temper ambition. This is especially the case when people seemingly automatically talk themselves out of possible attempts to improve their fortunes (individually or collectively) with the logic that "there is nothing to be done, it is impossible to accomplish anything in Russia today, given all the corruption, banditism, laziness... we might try to do something, but no one will give us any help, indeed everyone will try their best to hold us back, crush our ambitions." This is a comment I have heard from potential entrepreneurs as well as from working class individuals, and it serves as both an explanation for hardship and a justification for not trying to devise even small-scale solutions to local problems. Nearly everyone can relate some horror story about some acquaintance's attempt improve his or her situation and how it went awry. Through these stories, people collectively reinforce their belief that the situation is hopeless, or that it doesn't depend on them.

Most people share the conviction (expressed constantly in long complaints about the situation today in Russian) that "the Russian people" are not responsible for economic disintegration. Although people may blame certain traits which they identify with "the Russian character" (laziness, passivity, alcoholism, backwardness, recklessness) as contributing to today's problems, they are much more likely to put the weight of blame on top politicians and reformers (Yeltsin, Gaidar, and Chubais, especially), on the government elites in general, on "New Russians," on foreign governments and corporations, or, especially in provincial cities, on "international Zionist conspiracies" and "Jewish bankers."

Although there may be a target for resentment close at hand, often in the form of a factory director and his top staff who are enriching themselves in plain sight of unpaid workers (this is an image presented constantly), there seem to be few attempts on the part of groups of workers to address such injustices: there is a sense, no doubt correct, and no doubt partly stemming from past dealings with "party bosses," that an entire network of corrupt and greedy "bosses" stands behind the singular boss of their experience. Furthermore, people so depend on the little that they receive from whatever employment they maintain (in factories in particular) that to challenge the conditions under which they are working is to risk losing all.9

Since the media is full of reports from all corners of Russia about extreme, absurd, unimaginable suffering due to poverty, people value their smallest achievements in the realm of economic survival, where even maintaining a bare minimum for their families qualifies as an accomplishment. Though most people know or know of someone who has done well under present

9 A bitter joke has it that soon the bosses will charge the workers for coming in the factory door.
conditions, they know far more people who are worse off than they themselves; conversations often
turn around the problems of others less well off. This is perhaps small consolation; but it serves to
courage a sense of gratitude for relative "prosperity."

Ethnographic studies of impoverished communities have often shown that by managing to help
others in similar or worse situations, people challenge the sense of powerlessness which poverty
induces: assisting others allows them to feel that they aren't at the end of their resources, or at the
very bottom of the economic pile. Giving allows people to remain part of a moral or social economy
even as the material economy grinds to a standstill around them; this can have material as well as
psychological benefits in that it allows people to remain in the network of exchange and mutual
assistance. A sense of dignity and personal status is also maintained through giving.

Even people in rather dire circumstances in Russia continue to give: this may be a hundred
rubles daily to beggars in the metro, or contributions to the Orthodox church.\(^{10}\) People often buy
things for their children or grandchildren even though the latter are often better off; this pattern of
assisting the younger generations, sometimes quite extensively, was standard throughout Soviet times
(and before). When I worked in a soup kitchen for the elderly in Moscow, I was the constant
recipient of small gifts — homemade dolls, a book, a packet of postcard; though extremely destitute,
these elders nonetheless needed to feel themselves givers and not just receivers, arguably for all of
the reasons described above.

A range of metaphysical explanations for Russia's hardships echo in conversations and the
media; most of these stem from traditional religious ideologies, and they often relate to overall
conceptions of Russia's history as one of suffering and travail. The idea that suffering confers
blessedness runs through much of Russian Orthodox tradition, and many people, especially elders,
experience their misfortunes through the lens of this belief system (which is far more complex than I
credit here). One man presented a variation on this theme, saying that "we are now paying for all
the sins committed in the name of Communism." When I asked why it was "the people" that were
bearing the brunt of the difficulty, he replied, "it is always the people, the poor, the powerless
whose suffering cleanses the sins of society."

Related to these mystical ideas, but taking a wholly different approach, are the myriad stories,
jokes, and scornful commentaries about "New Russians." By implicit juxtaposition, "the people"
appears as embodying the opposite of all the immoral and anti-social qualities ascribed to "New
Russians." Through disdainful mocking of the exploits of the new wealthy, people may construct
some collective consolation in the realm of identity.

\(^{10}\)Although many feel it is an enormous waste of funds which could better be spent on social programs, the rebuilding
of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow (razed by Stalin) has been extensively supported by pensioners, who see
it as a symbol of the resurrection of Russian culture and values.
Reflections on the past play a role, as well. People invoke memories of the Great Patriotic War (WWII) to make comparisons — both for better and for worse — with the challenges of living in the 1990s. One significant function this fulfills is that it reinforces a sense that the Russian people have the wherewithal to endure whatever degree of hardship may arise. Remembrance of the war serves a practical function as well: people can rely on the technologies of survival learned and rehearsed during and after the war years.

Images of the future vary considerably, but these too are important in overall psycho-social survival. While some people declare dramatically that "things will never be better in Russia!" most others harbor a belief that things will inevitably improve, at least somewhat, though most are hard-put to explain how economic improvement might come about in any concrete terms. There seems to be a general belief that somehow "naturally" conditions must improve, however many decades this will take. Many have faith that the younger generation will see improved social, political, and economic conditions, possibly "when those who haven't been raised under our absurd communist system come to power." This faith in a better future is, arguably, both a positive and a negative phenomenon: while it may encourage people not to lose hope, it also promotes passivity, since it is a conception of improvement which will occur as if spontaneously; few people expressed any sense that their own actions may have a positive impact on transformations in their society.

Many people express the suspicion that things will get worse before they get better, some saying that they expect economic and social conditions to get much worse. Related to this is a sense that a turning point is coming; many say it will occur during the last months of 1997, when some dramatic events will mark a drastic shift in politics and the economy. While there do seem to be some rather extraordinary tendencies in current politics and in media discussion of the crisis in Russia at present, nonetheless, I have noted this kind of talk about "dramatic turning points" throughout the past ten years. It is possible that by keeping alive a sense of expectation of changes to come, people avoid recognition that the economic hardships they experience at present may continue indefinitely.

Despite all the difficulties and disappointments experienced over the past ten years, the majority of people I have spoken with insist that they would not want to return to the past. They extensively bemoan the loss of the security and stability of the last decades of communism; they deride the ill-considered and radical moves by which the economy was reformed, since these provided no impediments to massive-scale corruption and the dismantling of Russian industry. Nevertheless, most express a sense of relief that they are not, as one pensioner in Tver said, "being driven all the time by the ideological demands of the party." As she put it, "Though with every passing year it is harder and harder for me to say this, I constantly tell people, that I am ready to subsist on only a crust of bread, as long as I can say what I want to say and read the things I want to read."