Dying Unneeded
Parsons, Michelle A.

Published by Vanderbilt University Press

Parsons, Michelle A.
Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/32609.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32609

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1337726
Introduction

I first went to Russia in 1993 and 1994. It was a time largely regarded as lawless and chaotic, bezporiadok,\(^1\) or without order in Russian. In St. Petersburg I lived in a sleeper district in a Brezhnev-era apartment building at the then northernmost station of the blue metro line. Outside the Prospekt Prosveshchenia (Enlightenment Avenue) metro station elderly Russian women stood in lines selling a dried fish, a collection of homemade canned goods, or dried mushrooms on a string. They laid their meager wares on overturned wooden crates or a piece of canvas on the ground.

At this same metro station I watched men with cropped hair wearing leather jackets drive up in BMWs to the collection of kiosks. They offered protection to kiosk owners in exchange for cash. One morning the charred portion of a kiosk frame stood still smoldering in the cold, likely the cost of not buying enough protection from the mafia. On my way to Russian classes one morning I saw a man lying face down in the snow in a concrete planting bed, used for pansies in the spring. People streamed past him through the heavy swinging doors and into the warm blow of metro air. He was dead, a casualty of alcohol and winter temperatures.

During the summer of 1994, which I spent in Yekaterinburg in the Urals living with my friend Nadya\(^2\) and her teenage son, we went to the country cottage, or dacha. The dacha was located in a small village of dachas, surrounded by overgrown gardens. It was an idyllic setting. A small river meandered through the village. Grandfathers fished with their grandchildren. We collected wild mushrooms and harvested vegetables from the garden. I had one of the most amazing meals of my life in that unfinished, wooden hut—a garden vegetable and wild mushroom ragout cooked on a portable gas stove. After a winter of cabbage, onions, and carrots, the ragout tasted incredibly flavorful. That night Nadya and I lay on the bed and talked until late. I often wish I could reproduce that evening—at the dacha talking about life with Nadya, after a cold, gray winter.
Although I was not aware of it at the time, during the winter of 1993–1994 Russia reached the apex of the most extreme spike in mortality in modern history—“an unprecedented pace of deterioration in a country not at war” (Leon and Shkolnikov 1998, 790). There is only one other instance of comparable demographic decline in the modern era and that is the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. During a five-year period from 1990 through 1994, total life expectancy in Russia fell more than five years. Male life expectancy dropped more than six years to fifty-eight years; female life expectancy dropped more than three years to seventy-one years (Notzon et al. 1998). The sharpest declines occurred in 1992 and 1993, the first years of neoliberal economic shock therapy. In 2011 male life expectancy in Russia, at sixty-three years, still had the dubious distinction of being among the lowest for its income level (World Bank 2013). The sex difference in Russian (and Belarussian) life expectancies is the largest of any country in the world. In 2011 women lived, on average, twelve years longer than men, or seventy-five years (World Bank 2013).

The summer Nadya and I spent together, the increase in mortality was on the brink of abating, but the crisis was entrenched. Before I left Russia through Kazakhstan, Nadya’s son attempted suicide in the apartment bathroom.

MORTALITY

The questions I initially set out to answer were about death. What made the early 1990s so life threatening? Why did so many Russians die? But I found that in answering these questions, death was less important than life. Patterns of death are deeply embedded in culture and have more to do with the question “How do we live?” than with the question “How do we die?” The mortality crisis opens a window on Russian life and vitality, and the spontaneity of social connections that make life worth living. Nevertheless, my initial research question was along the lines of “Why did more Russians die in the early 1990s?”

In his May 2005 “State of the Country” speech, Putin identified the demographic crisis (demograficheskii krizis) as one of the most important problems facing Russian society. The demographic crisis revolves around both increasing mortality and decreasing fertility. Fertility fell from an average of 2 children per woman in 1989 to 1.4 in 1994 and 1.2 in 1997. By 2011 the rate had rebounded a little to 1.5 (World Bank 2013).
The population of the Russian Federation, estimated at 148.7 million in 1992, declined by almost 7 million until 2009 when it began to grow again (World Bank 2013). And while a declining population is not unique in the world—Russia joins other European and East Asian countries with extremely low fertility rates—a rising mortality rate in an industrialized country is unique.

Troubling demographic trends go back to at least the 1960s when the Soviet Union became the first industrialized country to sustain a mortality reversal. In 1965 Russian men’s life expectancy began to decline and women’s life expectancy began to plateau. This is in contrast to substantial improvements in life expectancy during the past half century in most areas of the world. Since the 1960s there have been periods of improvement in Russia, but in 2011 Russian men’s life expectancy, at sixty-three years, was no better than it was a half century earlier.

The historical divergence in life expectancies between Eastern and Western Europe is dubbed the East-West divide (Vägerö and Illsley 1992). Sociologist Watson (1995) pinned the mortality divide from the mid-1960s to 1990 on perceived relative deprivation compared to the West and social exclusion, especially among unmarried men. Family life benefited women more than men. “Despite the physical demands it makes, a woman’s family role under state socialism (given that she was also employed) was also a resource and a way of creating meaning; it was the way of coping” (Watson 1995, 932). Watson’s analysis is insightful for mortality in the early 1990s too.

From 1992 through 1994 mortality registered a dramatic increase in Russia. The increase in mortality was so striking that initially there was some concern as to whether it was an artifact of better death recording. It is now well established by epidemiologists that the data represent a real phenomenon (Leon et al. 1997; Notzon et al. 2003; Notzon et al. 1998). While increases were also striking in the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Belarus, and the Ukraine, the most severe increases were seen in Russia. Both men’s and women’s mortality were affected, but men’s declined more markedly, widening the already-pronounced sex difference. In 1992 the sex difference in life expectancy at birth was ten years; by 1994 it was over fourteen years (World Bank 2013). Shkolnikov, Field, and Andreev, citing Watson’s work above, surmise that the sex difference is due to the fact that men and women “cope with stress in different ways: Compared with women, men are more likely to abuse alcohol, engage in violent or suicidal behavior, smoke more, and eat less healthily” (2001, 153).
Surprisingly, excess mortality in the early 1990s was concentrated in the wealthier and more developed regions of Russia. In the western metropolises of Moscow and St. Petersburg, male life expectancy decreased by 7.7 and 7.1 years, respectively, from 1990 to 1994 (Leon and Shkolnikov 1998). This compares to the national average of 6.1 years (Notzon et al. 1998). Those born between the years 1936 and 1954 have been identified as the generation suffering the greatest proportion of excess deaths in the early 1990s when they were between forty and fifty-five years old (Leon et al. 1997; Notzon et al. 1998; Walberg et al. 1998). Working-class men with less education were particularly at risk (Chenet, Leon et al. 1998; Malyutina et al. 2004; Plavinski, Plavinskaya, and Klimov 2003; Shkolnikov, Leon et al. 1998).

The post-Soviet mortality crisis in Russia has been the subject of epidemiological and social science literatures since the mid-1990s. The principal causes of excess mortality are cardiovascular, injuries (suicide, homicide, and other injury), and alcohol-related deaths, including alcohol dependence syndrome, alcohol poisoning, and chronic liver disease and cirrhosis. Alcohol-related deaths have received the most attention (Leon, Shkolnikov, and McKee 2009), with recent studies claiming that a quarter to half of total mortality among working-age men is attributable to hazardous drinking (Leon et al. 2007; Tomkins et al. 2012; Zaridze, Brennan et al. 2009). The literature on the crisis mostly interprets alcohol consumption in the early 1990s as an escape from stress—maladaptive coping. The other theme in the literature on the Russian mortality crisis is the lack of social capital, which is sometimes seen as a holdover of Soviet society (Kennedy, Kawachi, and Brainerd 1998; Rose 1999, 1995) and sometimes a result of neoliberal economic reform (Field, Kotz, and Bukhman 2000; Field and Twigg 2000; Stuckler and Basu 2013; Twigg and Schecter 2003). Along these lines, Field has likened the early 1990s in Russia to a postwar zone (Field 1995, 2000).

Epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson’s theory, elaborated in numerous books and articles (Wilkinson 1996, 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), is that income inequality drives mortality patterns in the industrialized world. It does so primarily through its deleterious effect on social connections. Russia is an example of how social connections are steeped in culture—to the extent that it is possible to misrecognize them from an outside perspective. For some scholars, Russian forms of social connection, especially but not exclusively during the Soviet era, are discredited as evidence of corruption and lack of trust. Therefore, Russian social connections themselves are seen as pathogenic. This is in contrast to Russian accounts of the crisis in
the early 1990s that point to how political and economic dissolution undoes social connections.

I decided to focus my research in the city of Moscow where excess mortality was among the most severe in the early 1990s. In Moscow, I conducted interviews among the ages most at risk of dying then—that is, men and women between fifty-five and seventy years old in 2006 and 2007. My research, to a degree I did not initially recognize, is about a certain generation of Muscovites—their life histories and the intersection of these with the history of the Soviet Union and the world in the twentieth century.

With support from my anthropology department at Emory, I traveled to Moscow during the summer of 2004 to make contacts, gauge the feasibility of my research, pilot test interview guides, and brush up on my Russian, which I had not spoken for ten years. Encouraged, and funded, I returned to Moscow in July 2006 for eleven more months of fieldwork. I planned to do sixty in-depth interviews and a representative survey of a neighborhood in a northern sleeper district, along with participant observation in the daily lives of a subset of my interviewees. I managed forty in-depth interviews with the help of a research assistant and dropped the survey entirely. I added two sites of participant observation at a seminar on post-Soviet mortality in Kiev, Ukraine, in October 2006 and a seminar on alcohol policy in Moscow in March 2007. These seminars brought together social scientists who study the mortality crisis.

My ethnographic research primarily took place in 2006 and 2007, although I also draw upon my experience living in Russia in 1993 and 1994, during the apex of the mortality crisis. I intended to focus on the early 1990s, and did so in the interviews. I also came to understand that my informants often spoke broadly about post-Soviet times and did not always make distinctions between the early 1990s and later 1990s, or even the 2000s. I spoke with those who survived, although many had friends and family who died. These would be major methodological problems in an epidemiological study. My objective, however, was not to establish causal associations but rather to understand the perceptions and experiences of middle-aged Muscovites in the early post-Soviet period. Memories do tend to hold the meaning and emotion of past experiences (Schacter 1996). They also combine the past and the present, as new information merges with old. In that way, memories mimic postsocialist culture.

The evolution of my project, from a general question about why Russians died to an account of what made life worth living for a certain generation of
Muscovites, owes much to the method of ethnography—living in Moscow for more than a year, observing, listening, and participating in people’s lives.

**ETHNOGRAPHY**

Ethnography is the cornerstone method of anthropology, although it may also refer to a book that describes in detail the way of life of a specific group of people—the Nuer of Southern Sudan, East Harlem crack dealers, migrant workers in Israel, or “mail-order” marriages. Ethnographic research entails participating in the lives of people through a period of extended fieldwork. As a method, ethnography purports to open a view on these people and their lives from the inside—the emic perspective. Ethnographers attempt to explain how these people see the world around them and to throw light not only on what they think, say, and do but also on how and why they think, say, and do those things. It is a lofty goal that assumes ethnographers will be able, at least in part, to put aside their own cultural viewpoints and judgments to open their minds and immerse themselves in another worldview and way of being. In my case, the point is not to simply write about Russia’s most recent transformation and its mortal consequences but rather to represent ordinary Russian points of view on the subject. Of course, there are many points of view even among elderly Muscovites, but the idea is to seek cultural ideas and logics that undergird these points of view.

In this way, there is some pressure for an ethnographer to make sense of things in order to write about them coherently, although there are some ethnographers who consciously resist this. This pressure to understand and make sense of Moscow very nearly led to my undoing as an anthropologist. I thought I had made a mistake about my project, and possibly about my career. I had gone into anthropology because I loved living in different countries, learning new languages, and talking with people who lived different lives. But the pressure to make sense of things took the joy out of the experience. I would come home at night thinking, “This is impossible. This place makes no sense. I can’t make any sense of things.” I was struggling to craft a coherent story about Moscow, Russia, mortality, and culture.

One day walking home, discouraged, I had a small epiphany. One of the defining characteristics of the city, and perhaps the country as a whole, is a “sense” of incoherence, absurdity, and unpredictability. Of course, I knew this from living in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Moscow in 1993, 1994, and 2004. I knew this from Russians who told me that their life was
incomprehensible and absurd. I knew this from reading other ethnographies about Russia where informants warn their anthropologists: “It is impossible for you Westerners to understand our lives . . . trying to understand us rationally. Russian reality is based on absurdisms—economic, social, even scientific. All our life is based on absurdity, impossibility. Russian daily life is simply absurd and preposterous” (Ries 1997, 94). I knew this from my own feelings about living in Russia: the exhilaration and the frustration.

Russian émigrée Boym writes of estrangement and longing as part and parcel of what she calls ironic nostalgia—"a good balance between homesickness and the sickness of being home that is necessary for a cultural mythologist" (Boym 1994, 290). Even for her people, Russia refuses to submit. This is how she charms and this is how she frustrates. She is never completely known and always retains her ability to surprise, in both pleasant and unpleasant ways. Russian poet Fyodor Tyutchev’s observation is widely quoted:

You cannot understand Russia by your mind,  
Cannot measure her with a common yardstick:  
She has a special character  
You can only believe in Russia.

Under the pressure to be a social scientist, to make sense of things, and ultimately to write something with a point I had become blind to the obvious. Once I accepted that things did not have to make sense, indeed that my point could be that things did not make sense, I relaxed. I listened. I stopped trying to test everything I heard against some hypothesis I was working on in my head. I began to enjoy Moscow, myself, and my work. This, I believe, was when I started to do ethnography. As an observer of culture, I started to wonder about things that, at first, had no apparent relation to mortality.

But why should ethnography have anything to say about mortality—ostensibly the ultimate biological outcome? After all, epidemiology has identified a population at risk—middle-aged, working-class male Muscovites—and the primary causes of the mortality crisis—cardiovascular deaths, alcohol-related deaths, and injuries. Epidemiologists have also proposed drivers of these particular causes of death: a lack of social capital, harmful drinking behaviors, and the stresses of neoliberal reform. In that sense it is possible to argue that the answer to the question “Why did Russians die?” has already been answered. Russians, without a sense
of community or safety net, responded to stress by drinking themselves to death. Simplifying it like this is not meant to diminish epidemiology, but ethnography accomplishes something different.

At a minimum, ethnography aids in the interpretation of epidemiological findings—the statistics that indicate associations between variables. In the case of Russian mortality, this ethnography helps explain puzzles in the epidemiological literature. Why are certain social connections associated with poorer health, while others are associated with better health? Why is alcohol drinking often associated with better health? Why do the effects of drinking vary among men?

Epidemiologists attempting to explain these findings have offered interpretations, but they are often prefaced with an admission that the findings are “difficult to explain” or “difficult to interpret” (Bobak et al. 1998). Some interpretations are little more than conjecture about life in the Soviet Union and Russia. Others are more cautious. Malyutina et al. admit, “we need to clarify the reasons for excess mortality in non-drinkers” (2002, 1453). Some aspects of the mortality crisis remain poorly understood despite an impressive amount of epidemiological research.

Beyond interpretation, ethnography provides answers of a different order to the question “Why did more Russians die?” Ethnographers attempt to understand how individual health and behavior is tied up with larger social processes. By highlighting how political and economic structures make some choices more possible than others, ethnography is an antidote to a perspective which assumes that individuals make lifestyle choices that determine their health. In the case of Russian mortality, it is necessary to explore not only lifestyle variables such as diet, drink, and exercise but also the meanings of these, in addition to family roles, gender, work, morality, exchange, economy, and history. Political economy and culture give rise to lifestyles and give meaning to life. Some epidemiologists openly acknowledge that broader questions remain unanswered. In a recent article Leon, Shkolnikov, and McKee write, “We are still lacking an adequate account of what underlying mechanisms may have transmitted the shocks of the collapse of communism . . . to the behaviours of individuals” (2009, 1634). I consider this a call for ethnography, which elucidates that middle ground between political economy and individuals.

Ethnography offers a broad, holistic approach that deals in culture, a contentious concept even among anthropologists. Some anthropologists see a danger of essentialism and naïveté in cultural analyses, especially in an era
of global capitalism. Others stake a claim for culture—the logics and meanings undergirding social practices. I find myself among those in the latter camp, but these logics and meanings are clearly part and parcel of political economy too. Especially among the generation of older Muscovites, who spent most of their lives in a society marked by more homogeneity in housing, education, work, and leisure pursuits, culture is apropos. Today’s Russia is different—younger generations of Muscovites respond to a more diverse set of cultural logics and meanings. They may not respond to the same cultural logics and meanings as older Muscovites, or they may respond to them differently. When writing about culture, there is always the danger of stereotyping Russians, but I believe in a concept of culture as shared and tacit understandings that make it possible to think, act, and live among others—part common sense, part disposition, part discipline.

While epidemiologists strive for standardized surveys of representative samples, ethnographers pursue more circuitous and amorphous paths in collecting their data through conversations, unstructured interviews, or merely spending time with people in different settings. The insider, or emic, view is held paramount. Concepts and categories used in analysis should be meaningful to members of that culture. In some cases, that means letting go of ideas and assumptions that lead ethnographers to the field. Ethnography may even change the very questions that send researchers into the field by continually presenting a stream of cultural data, stubbornly resistant to certain questions and unexpectedly yielding to others. My interviewees knew about the demographic crisis and mortality. But raising the subject in interviews only seemed to derail the flow. Asking about interviewees’ own health did not work either. The people we talked with were eloquent storytellers when asked about their lives and how things had changed in the early 1990s. They were intent on answering the question “What makes life worth living?” And what made life worth living was a sense of being needed. Ethnography went far beyond placing behavioral risk factors in cultural context. Older Muscovites’ perspectives on life brought into relief other perspectives on life—including those held by Western scholars. As a result, this account does not merely “add culture” through stories and anecdotes. Rather, it draws attention to cultural logics and meanings underpinning emic concepts such as being needed and etic concepts such as social capital.

Being needed is the central concept around which this ethnography spins. The early 1990s eroded this generation’s sense of being needed. In the end, I argue that being unneeded is related to mortality. In this way, I traveled
full circle from my initial questions on mortality back to mortality, but only after ethnography forced me to loosen my preconceptions and listen to what people wanted to tell me. The result is a thoroughly cultural account of the experience of a generation of Muscovites. Mortality is but one aspect of this generation’s experience, and one that they themselves do not necessarily privilege. But retaining a focus on mortality illustrates how culture—even at its most sublime—gets under the skin and inhabits the physical body. Being needed serves as a bridge between political economy and mortality, or between historical events and individual lives—and deaths.

Older Muscovites would find accusations of a lack of social connection in Soviet society as responsible for excess mortality highly ironic. According to many of them, social connections suffered as a consequence of the fall of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalism.

BEING NEEDED

In hindsight, the importance of being needed made itself plain very early in my fieldwork when I was meeting with contacts and explaining my project. In a cow-themed Moo-Moo cafeteria, a Russian cardiologist listened politely to my idea of interviewing people between the ages of fifty-five and seventy.

“Ah, yes, nobody needs them [никому не нужны],” he said, as if it were a well-known fact. His words struck me as cruel, but he clearly did not mean them that way. I remember the remark because it confused me. His demeanor was so straightforward. Did he really believe that nobody needed them? At the time, I felt that I did not fully understand his meaning, but I did not dwell on it. As I interviewed and later read over interview transcripts, the expression was repeated again and again in reference to post-Soviet life. “I became unnecessary to the state,” said one man. “They said you aren’t needed anywhere,” another explained in reference to losing work. “Who needs us? Who is needed now?” said a woman about the death of a friend.

Over time it became clear that being needed was about having something to offer others. For most of their lives, having something to offer others (something in short supply, a favor, a contact) translated into social status. In everyday life, an economy of shortages promoted an “economy of favors” (Ledeneva 1998). Ledeneva writes about needed people (she translates it as “useful people”) “who were in demand when something was needed” (115). Older Muscovites spoke about suddenly feeling unneeded in the early 1990s—both unneeded by the state and by others around them.
Referring to their many years of work experience, one former defense factory worker lamented, “What rich experience—it just seemed that we would still be needed.” They found a sense of neededness where they could. Teachers were thankful they were still needed by their students, if not the state. A man, unneeded, was needed again when he took care of his granddaughter. Mothers were needed by their children and grandchildren.

Being needed was gendered. “A lot of [men] felt unneeded, useless, defective.” But “a woman tries to be needed in whatever situation—to find herself somewhere where she is really needed.” And: “[A woman] is always needed because she is in the family.” Men’s sense of neededness centered on being able to adequately provide—a possibility that narrowed substantially in the early 1990s. Women’s sense of neededness was more diffuse and included, importantly, being able to hold their families together in times of hardship. In this sense, the early 1990s meant that women were sometimes quite desperately needed. They were undoubtedly burdened by this responsibility, but they may have also been preserved by it.

As much as this book is about a particular generation, it is also about a particular experience—becoming unneeded. As will become clear, being unneeded is a distal driver of the mortality crisis. Being unneeded translates social collapse to bodily death from cardiovascular and alcohol-related causes. Being needed is related to the death of the body, but it is also related to the life of the soul. This is a story about mortality, but in order to understand it in cultural context, the story must start with vitality. What makes life worth living?

**VITALITY**

In Russia, a soulful person is a person who gives—a needed person. A soulless person holds back. Soulfulness is related to generosity and communion. A generous person is “wide-souled” (Pesmen 2000, 151). In Margaret Paxson’s beautiful ethnography of a Russian village, a soulful person is open and expansive, generous and hospitable, while a soulless one is controlled and disciplined (Paxson 2005, 79). The soul (*dusha*) emanates from an individual but is not the property of an individual. Dale Pesmen, who has written a deep ethnography of the Russian soul, quotes a friend who explains, “Dusha isn’t in individuals but in their union” (Pesmen 1995, 71). The Russian soul has a directionality—outward—and a sociality. Soulful social connections “are vectors, dynamic in nature, that move out from the individual and into
the world” (Paxson 2005, 100). Wierzbicka writes, “The Russian ‘duša’ is not simply an individual human soul but a ‘soul’ that comes into being, and that lives, in the ‘obščenie’ (communing talk) with other people’ (2003, 427).

The soul extends outward, offering individuals more space (prostor). A social soul enlarges the experience of the self. In certain social interactions “the self is unlocked,” writes Paxson (2005, 100). But space can also threaten the self with its unknown and unbound qualities. There is the possibility of losing oneself in all that space. To keep space safe, it must be bounded. In social communion, “The self is unlocked, and there is some boundedness around the group” (100). Social connections grant individuals more space, but they also keep individuals bound. And in keeping them bound, they keep them safe.

In Soviet times, social connections served to enlarge space and possibilities for people and to help them get around the System (Sistema). So they had a transgressive quality, an alternative morality, whereby rules could be broken. Limits could be pushed back, constraints eased. Where the System closed off possibilities, social connections might open them up again. And in this way, social connections also imparted a sense of freedom from larger, more powerful forces in Soviet society—the political economy of Soviet socialism. Through social connections individuals might attain, however fleeting, a feeling of collective freedom from Soviet order, even as social connections also depended on the this same social order.

Older Muscovites were often nostalgic for Soviet order (poriadok) because it ordered social connections. People’s positions vis-à-vis the Soviet state influenced what people could give to other people—the ways they could be soulful and needed. Work was the principal means by which Soviet citizens were ordered by the state. At work, Russians had personal connections and access to resources and services. Someone in the Soviet bureaucracy could arrange permission to build a dacha. A friendly butcher could set aside a good cut of meat. A test proctor could help a student pass an entrance examination. Collectively, people often circumvented the state, but they depended on the state to do that. Order here refers to both the order of the state and the order of social relations because they are mutually constitutive.

The paradox of space (prostor) and order (poriadok)—the unbound and bound quality of social relations in Soviet society—resolves into the even higher-order concept of freedom. For these elderly Muscovites, freedom was not always compromised by the Soviet state. In some cases, the constraint of the Soviet state heightened a sense of freedom. As people, using their
connections, collectively pushed against the limits of the state, and as those limits bent back or gave way, they experienced a sense of freedom. This was a freedom that hinged on constraint. From a Western perspective it might seem an impoverished freedom, and oftentimes, it must be said, Russians were not successful in pushing back the System. The System refused to bend or it pushed back, sometimes quite violently, especially under Stalin. But the System loosened over time. And when people did manage to get around the rules, to circumvent the System or to collectively redistribute goods and services, this was a triumph of people against the state. When people were successful in asserting themselves against the Soviet state, they had a sense of freedom from determination by the state—its politics, its economy. This freedom felt imminently human, almost spiritual, because people attained it through human relationships bent on overcoming everyday trials. Freedom was space (prostor), but it was a space contingent on the order (poriadok) of social relations and the state.

The abstract concepts of space, order, and freedom speak to the vitality of Soviet life. The spontaneity and serendipity of social connections asserted themselves against the System even as they were rooted in the System. But how do such cultural abstractions speak to the mortality crisis? When the state fell, a framework of social connections also fell. Elderly Muscovites spoke about not knowing people or not being able to place people in the new Russia. This severely compromised their ability to act together. Furthermore, what they had collectively asserted themselves through and against had fallen apart. There was a sense of chaos and disorder (bezporiadok) against which people could not act. This translated into a profound sense of social isolation and powerlessness, which are related to alcohol-related mortality, homicides, and suicides. Recent epidemiology shows that these feelings are also related to cardiovascular mortality through physiologic processes that are still being elucidated. While social epidemiology has shown that social isolation and perceived control have serious emotional and physical health consequences, it has failed to explore how the logic of isolation and powerlessness may be culturally and temporally specific.

Elderly Muscovites spoke about being unneeded. Fundamentally, being unneeded is about the loss of ability to give to others and thus to intervene in social life. Being needed is also tied up with abstract ideas of space, order, and freedom. On one side, being needed opens into an account of Russian vitality, spirituality, and life; on the other side, being unneeded narrows into an account of Russian mortality, disorder, and death. Deep, even
philosophical cultural currents drive patterns of health and death in Russia as elsewhere. In the language of Durkheim (1979), who wrote about national rates of suicide in the 1800s, population statistics are subject to social currents.

RUSSIA

This book is not intended as a history of twentieth-century Russia, but some basic background is necessary, especially in the areas of Soviet history, its economy, and the so-called transition to capitalism.

The Russian Revolution in 1917, inspired by the political philosophy of Karl Marx (1818–1883), ushered in seventy years of socialism, originally envisioned as the historical stage after capitalism and before communism. In Marx’s political philosophy the means of production are socialized during a dictatorship of the proletariat, while communism is a stateless, classless society, following socialism. In 1961 Nikita Khrushchev, head of the Communist Party from 1953 to 1964, proclaimed that the Soviet Union would be communist by 1980. In the 1970s, Leonid Brezhnev, his successor, clarified that the Soviet Union was in a long historical stage of “mature” socialism. Communism was never attained.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin led the Russian socialist state through its tortuous first years until his death in 1924, by which time it had become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Under Joseph Stalin’s rule from 1928 to 1953, the Soviet Union underwent a period of extremely rapid industrialization, urbanization, and collectivization, accompanied by ruthless repressions and famine in the 1930s. The 1940s were marked by World War II and more famine. The late 1940s and early 1950s, before Stalin’s death in 1953, were the height of the Soviet state, marked by economic growth and developments in science and technology. Signs of the economy slowing were first apparent in the 1960s, although most Russians may not have recognized this until the mid-1970s and Brezhnev’s period of “stagnation.” The generation of older Muscovites in this book came of age during the height of the Soviet state.

The Soviet state was paternalistic, providing full employment, housing, health care, and retirement pensions to its citizenry. It also aimed to create a New Soviet Person instilled with socialist values such as collectivism. “The New Soviet Person was to be not only clean, sober, and efficient but also prepared to sacrifice his or her individual interests for the good of the collective,
in sharp contrast to the ideal of liberal individualism” (Hoffmann 2003, 10). Soviet ideology promoted the collectivist ethic at work and at home.

The economy of the Soviet Union was a planned economy, based on a series of five-year plans. It was weighted toward heavy industry, not consumer goods. Centralized planning was hampered by misinformation and hoarding of supplies (Verdery 1996). Due to these and other factors, there were chronic shortages of consumer goods. People often waited in long lines to buy food and other necessities. They made due without items such as deodorant or washing machines. There was an element of unpredictability and happenstance in consumerism. While this often led to frustration, it also created moments of serendipity. Informal economies of barter between firms and exchange between individuals served to redistribute goods and services in the shortage economy (Kornai 1980; Verdery 1996). Procuring goods had little to do with money and everything to do with personal relationships and connections. While Western observers may view this as corruption, older Muscovites often remember it as more humanistic.

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 it was clear that the System was in dire need of reform. Gorbachev instituted a period of glasnost and perestroika, or openness and restructuring. Initially, this may have inspired hope for a better future, but the machinations of reform soon grew unwieldy. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) seized the opportunity and began clamoring for independence from the Soviet Union, emboldening other nationalist movements. Amid a failed hardliner coup in August 1991, Boris Yeltsin, then president of the Russian republic of the Soviet Union, rose in popularity and power. In December of that same year, Yeltsin met with the presidents of Belarus and the Ukraine and dissolved the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, thus eliminating Gorbachev’s position. The Soviet Union, an empire of fifteen republics, no longer existed.

The years immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union were chaotic in Russia, as it embarked on a “big bang” or “shock therapy” approach to transitioning from a socialist planned economy to a capitalist free market. This approach had its roots in economist Milton Friedman’s ideas and was inspired by neoliberalism in the West, heralded by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Solidified into the Washington Consensus in 1989, neoliberal reforms were supposed to result in a liberalized, stabilized, and privatized economy. In
Russia, privatization occurred very rapidly, and many of the state’s biggest assets were divvied up among Yeltsin’s “family” (semya), or cronies. This process was accompanied by hyperinflation, high levels of unemployment, and widespread poverty.

During Yeltsin’s years, the Russian mafia also rose up to fill a power vacuum. By the time of his resignation in 1999, Yeltsin was very unpopular, regarded by many as a corrupt alcoholic. In comparison, his successor Vladimir Putin was thought to have restored order (pordiadok). Putin, either as president or prime minister, has held political power in Russia since the year 2000. He has deep connections with Russian law enforcement, business, and the mafia. Many Russians admire his ability to command order and stand up to the West. But there is growing unrest, in the West and in Russia itself, with his authoritarianism and the silencing of opposition.

POST-SOVIEt ETHNOGRAPHY

Post-Soviet ethnographers regard a “transition to capitalism” as a misnomer. Transition implies a move from one known state to another. The early post-Soviet era is better regarded as transformation, rather than transition, where the future was continually being created with unpredictable results (Berdahl 2000; Buyandelgeriyn 2008; Gal and Kligman 2000; Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002; Hemment 2004a; Shevchenko 2001). Verdery (1996) shook up some of the assumptions behind the idea of transition with her question, “A transition from socialism to feudalism?” She advocated that ethnographers attend “to what is happening rather than . . . what ought to happen” (228). “Transition” erases the variability of whatever came before and the variability of capitalism. It pulls attention to the before and after with labels such as communism, socialism, and capitalism rather than to that which resists labels. Anthropology can be an antidote to narrow conceptualizations. It is possible to speak of “national capitalisms” (Kennedy 2001) or, for example, “Wild East” capitalism (Lindquist 2001c) in Russia during the early 1990s. More recently, Collier (2011) has staged another anthropological intervention in the use of the concept “neoliberal” to understand Russian economic reform in the 1990s. He argues that too much is left obscure about neoliberalism. Neoliberal economic reforms are not “a rigid ideological project” (2). They are also cultural constructions involving compromises with Soviet social welfare. The post-Soviet cultural landscape is one marked by change, continuity, and emergent hybrid forms. The past is crucial in understanding
the present. That being said, there is also debate about the usefulness of the concepts “postsocialism” or “post-Soviet” (Humphrey 2002a). Sampson, who works in the Balkans, has declared postsocialism over: “the shock has worn off” and the new order is “embedded in people’s consciousness” (2002, 298). While this is certainly happening, post-Soviet is still a trenchant concept for the older Muscovites of this study. “I prefer everything sovkovoe,”3 or Soviet-style, one said. “I have not yet restructured myself.”

There is no escaping memory and nostalgia in post-Soviet ethnography (Todorova and Gille 2010). In her book on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym defines it as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (2001, xiii). In Russia there is nostalgia for both the past and “for the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete” (xvi). Post-Soviet nostalgia is not merely the longing for Soviet society but for the future that never was. This was not necessarily the utopian “radiant future” of communism promised by Soviet ideology, but certainly an expected, taken-for-granted future. For middle-aged Muscovites nearing retirement when the Soviet Union fell, their future of a well-deserved retirement with an adequate pension was irretrievably lost. Particularly for this generation, memories comment on the present and future of a new Russia. Along with other postsocialist ethnographers (Dunn 2004; Kideckel 2008; Paxson 2005; Stillo 2013; Uehling 2004), I consider memories not only as an imperfect record of the past, but also primarily as commentary on the present. The romanticized past is a constant specter in the narratives older Muscovites tell. The radiant future becomes the “radiant past” (Burawoy and Lukács 1994). In this, older Muscovites revealed their perspectives on the present.

The radiance of the past emanates from social connections in the Soviet era. In her ethnography of a Russian village, Paxson (2005) argues that nostalgia about the past is fundamentally about the quality of social relations. In the East German discourse of nostalgia “metaphors of community and kinship have become increasingly prevalent. ‘We used to live like one big family here . . . now no one has time for anyone else’” (Berdahl 1999, 219). Elderly benefactors of a Moscow soup kitchen mourn “the loss of interpersonal relations and a move toward individualization” (Caldwell 2004, 201). Their ways of “making do” are still intimately tied to sociality (Caldwell 2004). Ledeneva’s seminal work on blat—“the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply” (Ledeneva 1998, 1)—illustrates how social connections in Soviet times were put to good use. Material pursuits in Soviet times were tied up with social ones.
Social connections in Russia remain a way of living a moral life amid circumstances widely regarded as immoral. Oushakine (2009) argues that Russians foster social connection around loss or tragedy. Pesmen (2000) writes about soulful communion, often when drinking alcohol together, that contests the new Russian order. In Zigon’s work on morality, “working on the self” (2010, 245–46) is done through communion (obshchenie) with others. Drawing on Wierzbicka (2003), Zigon argues that obshchenie “allows individuals to mutually develop each other and themselves . . . creating new moral persons” (2010, 97). Russian social connections allow individuals to access a moral space beyond the self and beyond the mundane.

When middle-aged Muscovites lament a loss of sociality, they are commenting on a perceived loss of morality. In this, their voices join with other moral critiques of free market capitalism by individuals and institutions in society, the Russian government and Russian Orthodox Church among them. Nevertheless, morality and sociality are changing in tandem (Zigon 2011; Bazylevych 2010).

When I first began to think about this project, there were very few references to the Russian demographic crisis in the anthropological literature (Rivkin-Fish 2001, 2003). Rivkin-Fish refers to the discourse of Russia’s “dying out” (2001, 29). She writes, “Physical crisis is mirrored in moral fragmentation; biological degeneration represents the nation’s social and ethical demise” (29). She points out that nationalists and advocates of Westernization alike think recovery “involve[s] changing the nature of social interactions, reconfiguring human relations, and healing the social bonds of daily life” (29) rather than merely changing politics. Recently, Rivkin-Fish’s work on fertility (2006, 2007, 2010) has considerably expanded the anthropological literature on that aspect of the demographic crisis. Leykin’s work on the politics of population in Russia (2011a, 2011b) also focuses primarily on fertility and pronatalism. She discusses the mortality crisis as part of the larger demographic crisis, even if Russian population prescriptions do not.

Post-Soviet health in Russia is broached more broadly in Rivkin-Fish’s work on reproductive health (1999, 2000), Raikhel’s work on addiction and treatment (2010; Raikhel and Garriott 2013), and Lindquist’s work on alternative healing and magic (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2006). The mortality crisis is sometimes noted as background (Pesmen 2000), as part of a larger discourse of decline (Oushakine 2009), or as related to stress and disempowerment among the working class (Kideckel 2008), but it has not been ethnographically examined in its own right. Ethnographers see alcohol consumption in
the region as creating social identity (Kideckel 1984) and social communion (Pesmen 1995, 2000), even as they acknowledge its destructive effects on men and women (Metzo 2009). Drinking alcohol is bound up with masculinity, and when other avenues for expressing masculinity recede it may become problematic (Zdravomyslova and Chikadze 2000; Creed 2011). Drinking together is status leveling and offers alternative moralities (Koester 2003; Sokolov 2006).

Gender is extensively treated in the anthropology and sociology of Soviet and post-Soviet society, although literature on masculinity is more recent (Kay 2006, 2007; Kukhterin 2000; Meshcherkina 2000; Utrata 2008, 2013; Utrata, Ispa, and Ispa-Landa 2012). According to many scholars the transition to capitalism made women more vulnerable in Russian society as they were disproportionately unemployed and social services such as child care were withdrawn (Attwood 1996; Gal and Kligman 2000; Hemment 2004a; Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004; LaFont 2001; Watson 1993). Bridger, Kay, and Pinnick claim, “It is . . . undeniable that women have borne a disproportionate share of the economic fallout of transition” (1996, 193). Hemment writes that “structural adjustment policies led to the dismantling of the social security system and sharp cutbacks in the health care system, affecting women disproportionately” (2004a, 817). There is some dissent on this point (Ashwin 2000; Kiblitskaya 2000). “There has been a tendency to consider the collapse of communism in terms of a balance sheet of losses and gains for women. . . . This approach . . . ignores the fact that men as well as women are challenged by the end of the Soviet era” (Ashwin 2000, 19). A crisis of masculinity, reflected in mortality and self-destructive behavior among the generation of men born around the Great Patriotic War, was openly acknowledged in Soviet society starting in the 1970s. Zdravomyslova and Temkina claim that many practices of masculinity were countercultural, including “friendship among men, drinking in groups, sports, getaways, and sexual philandering” (2012, 28). The late Soviet man “has created for himself a space relatively independent of the state where he can actualize the practices of true masculinity” (28–29). Others agree that masculinity is constructed through transgressive or oppositional practices. “A certain kind of modestly destructive mischief has been a key emblem of Russian masculinity” (Zdravomyslova and Chikadze 2000, 48; Ries 1997). Social scientists also locate the crisis of masculinity in the post-Soviet weakening of men’s ability to provide for their families (Kiblitskaya 2000; Zdravomyslova and Chikadze 2000). Creed (2011) proposes that cultural dispossession and
unemployment among post-Soviet Bulgarian men shifts the performance of masculinity to other spaces, in this case a ritual of folk masquerade, often accompanied by drinking and lewd or violent behavior.

There is no doubt that men were more likely to die in Russia in the early 1990s. While men are more likely to die than women in most places, the difference between men’s and women’s mortality in Russia is currently the largest in the world and widened appreciably in the early 1990s. An interpretation of historic differences in mortality of Russian men and women requires an understanding of men’s and women’s position under the Soviet state, social practices, and, most importantly, what makes life worth living for men and women in Russia. There is consensus among older Muscovites that men more easily became unneeded in the post-Soviet context.

**ORGANIZATION**

The organization of the book reflects my own discovery—that mortality, while the focus, is not the point of departure. Therefore, I save most of my discussion of mortality until Chapters 6 and 7. Instead, after a chapter on methods and Moscow, I explore the Russian cultural paradox of space and order. Space opens up through relationships of neededness, but these relationships also order space. People help each other, giving things that are needed and becoming needed people. The paradox of space and order is the cultural frame of this ethnography. The book then progressively narrows its focus, going from paradox to being needed to mortality. The narrative flows from life to death. The last chapter before the conclusion broadens out again to complete the frame—showing how the paradox explored earlier relates to the experience of freedom.

The first chapter of the book describes the Moscow cityscape—its monumental avenues and quiet courtyards. The focus of the chapter is a recorded conversation between two old friends reminiscing about one of Moscow’s radial streets in Soviet times. In their telling, space (prostor) references social relations and freedom, physically and metaphorically framed by the Soviet state. In the early 1990s the collapse of the state created chaos and disorder (bezporiadok), indeterminacy rendered dangerous without the limits of order—both state order and the order of social relations organized through the state. This chapter also provides more details on my ethnographic methods and the particular challenges of doing ethnography in Moscow.
Chapter 2 further explores the cultural paradox of space and order. Paradox is uniquely able to hold contradictions without sacrificing the concept of culture. Older Muscovites’ concern with unbound space (*prostor*) and the constraint of order (*poriadok*) is reflected in an appetite for the spontaneous and transgressive and nostalgia for the Soviet past. Soviet order created the very possibility for social relations that served to circumvent and oppose Soviet order. A Russian sense of space and freedom, which is connected to space, depends on thwarting order through social connections. The space-order paradox sheds light on another, theoretical paradox in social theory—that of structure and agency. Western social theorists often assume structure binds agency, while the Russian point of view is diametrically opposed: structure creates agency.

The next two chapters on war and work provide a background on this generation’s lives and illustrate how the paradox of space and order manifests in Soviet history, work, social exchange, and gender. This generation of Muscovites was born between 1936 and 1951—around the time of the Great Patriotic War, as World War II is called in Russia. The early hardships of war were given meaning through cultural tropes of sacrifice and collectivity. For this generation, poverty in the early 1990s recalled the war and postwar period, more than forty years earlier. The progressive trajectory of their lives swung back on itself. Moreover, their sacrifices were in vain and they themselves were rendered unneeded—without anything useful to offer the state or others around them. This generation had been needed by the state, first for postwar reconstruction and then to labor for the radiant future. They had also been needed by others, to survive the war and postwar hardships, and later to secure the goods and services the state did not provide them.

Chapter 4 establishes Soviet work as the principal nexus of space and order. Work was how Soviet citizens were integrated into the state but also how they collectively crafted their own space apart from, and sometimes opposed to, the state. This was a space for spontaneous action. Work also defined how and why people were needed by the state and by each other. At work people had access to connections, services, and goods that they used in practices such as *blat*—the use of personal networks to redistribute goods and services (Ledeneva 1998). People were needed because they could offer things to others; what they could offer was largely defined by where they worked and what they did there. The loss of work meant the loss of a social status based on the ability to give.
Chapter 5 describes how the destructive logic of shock therapy violently collided with the progressive logic of the Soviet state. The stories of Ivan and Lidia show how gender influenced the experience of shock therapy. While women were overburdened at home, to some extent these domestic responsibilities protected them from being unneeded. Men, whose domestic role had been narrowly defined as breadwinner, were much more vulnerable to being unneeded with the loss of work, salary arrears, or a diminished ability to provide, especially when set against ostentatious social inequality. Being unneeded set men on a desperate search for egalitarian social communion. A masculine predilection to push against order proved deadly when that order gave way in the early 1990s.

Chapter 6 outlines the contours of Russian mortality, drawing on the epidemiology of the crisis. The early 1990s marked a dramatic rise in mortality unprecedented in modern history. Working-class, middle-aged men living in the more developed regions of Russia, chief among these Moscow, were most at risk of dying from cardiovascular problems, injuries, and alcohol-related causes. In the epidemiological literature, which primarily focuses on alcohol, mortality is related to the Russian predilection for drink and a lack of social capital, often seen as a legacy of Soviet times.

Chapter 7 begins with an exchange on the Russian soul. The Russian soul is social and bears marks of both space and order. It offers individuals an existence beyond the confines of the self—a social expansiveness. With this come dangers that are held in check by the limits of order, in its interpersonal and institutional forms. Harm to the social soul renders the physical body vulnerable. This chapter links cardiovascular and alcohol-related deaths to being unneeded and to ruptures of the soul. I contrast this with Western epidemiologists’ emphasis on a lack of social capital in Soviet/Russian society and the use of alcohol as an escape. An anthropological reading of epidemiological studies makes sense of some puzzling epidemiological findings, such as the association between better reported health and alcohol use, an association between mortality and nondrinking, and an association between poorer reported health and reliance on civic associations.

Finally, I return to the theoretical frame to argue that Russian freedom, svoboda, is held in social relations that grant the individual both a sense of transcendence and autonomy from determination by larger forces, be they historical, political, economic, or cultural. Middle-aged Muscovites experienced a sense of freedom in a sociality that was intent on separation from and
opposition to the state. The early 1990s in Russia made svoboda less tenable precisely because individuals no longer had a clear view of space and order.

**DYING UNNEEDED**

When I tell people about the Russian mortality crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union, they often ask me to repeat myself. More people died? They assume that Russians, at long last, had freedom. Why would they die? One answer to this question, and one I commonly give, is the increase in cardiovascular and alcohol-related deaths, which together constitute the bulk of excess mortality. People are often content with that answer. They understand that this time may have been stressful as people lost their jobs and savings. What happened in Russia, however, was more than an economic depression and the dissolution of the state. In their own words, middle-aged Muscovites felt *ne nuzhny* (unneeded). Social isolation and powerlessness have consequences for health, but their logics vary by place and time. Another answer to the question “Why would they die?” is more provocative: Russians died precisely because they were free—free of the order that had provided them with the means to interact with those around them. The idea that Russians died because they were free is polemical. It is a way of challenging the popular, if tarnished, Western account that the early 1990s brought freedom to Russia. It also hints at an emic perspective that resists Western ideas of freedom, especially when they are bound up with processes of social disintegration and inequality.

Not all Russians died, of course. Mortality was most pronounced among the middle-aged in the capital city. These were the “generation of victors” born around the years of the Great Patriotic War. They came of age at the height of the Soviet state. Just as Russia was embarking on a scientific and technological revolution that propelled the Soviet Union’s economy during the 1950s and 1960s, this generation entered the workforce. After the suffering and sacrifices exacted during the war and reconstruction, the 1950s and 1960s were heady times. Later as the economy slowed and reform became inevitable, a radiant future—if not the radiant future—was still possible. When the Soviet state collapsed at the end of 1991, hope in a Soviet future was lost. In 1992 economic reforms meant that industry contracted severely, inflation skyrocketed, social services receded, and chaos reigned. For many ordinary Russians, hope in any future was threatened during this time.
This generation not only lost their work and savings—they lost their lives. Socially isolated and disempowered, many men died alcohol-related deaths as they tried to repair a sense of neededness by drinking. Women were protected from alcohol-related and cardiovascular deaths due to their central role in the family—they were still needed. The order this generation had used to navigate in society, to know others around them, and to interact socially was of little use in the chaos of that time. They died unconnected, unbound, unmoored.

World political economy had fatal consequences in Russia in the early 1990s. The rise of global neoliberalism, the fall of the Soviet state, and the introduction of economic reforms reverberated through Russian society, affecting social connections and the everyday possibilities of action that hinged on them.