Dying Unneeded
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In the late 1980s through 1990, under Gorbachev, there was a brief period of hope before shock therapy. Shock therapy bore the mark of Milton Friedman’s neoliberalism and was legitimated in the 1980s heyday of Reaganomics and Thatcherism. This chapter deals with the years of economic shock therapy from the perspective of older Muscovites. Ivan and Lidia introduce the themes of gender and inequality and their relationship to being unneeded.

**RESTRUCTURING**

Political scientists generally date perestroika from March 1985, when Gorbachev was appointed general secretary, to December 1991, when the USSR was dissolved and Gorbachev resigned. The vast majority of my informants did not think of perestroika in this way, but rather in its simple senses of restructuring or reconstruction. For many of them perestroika had no end date even as late as 2007. Gorbachev started the process and lost control of it, Yeltsin corrupted it, and Putin managed it.

When middle-aged Muscovites became aware of the process of reform they were, for the most part, hopeful. Economic progress had slowed and
there were shortages of food and household goods. They realized some change was necessary. Yet they held onto promises such as that made by the 1986 Congress of the Communist Party that each family would be provided with a separate apartment by the year 2000. They thought that reform meant that existing industries would start producing more consumer products. As one interviewee said:

Yes, yes, yes, there was a moment, when, naturally we all really wanted that those stagnant times would turn into more rapid development. […] First there wasn’t enough clothing. There wasn’t enough food. There wasn’t enough housing. Of course, we wanted everything to be better. We felt that there wasn’t enough for everyone, that someone was holding us back. And whether you wanted to or not, we felt the influence of that stagnation on us.

In the political realm, Gorbachev faced increasing opposition. Yeltsin, as the first democratically elected president of the Russian Soviet Republic in June 1991, was riding a crest of popular support. In August 1991 Yeltsin stood atop a tank in front of the Russian parliament building, known as the White House, as the defender of democracy against an attempted coup. In December of that same year, the leaders of Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine dissolved the USSR, effectively forcing Gorbachev to resign.

Under Yeltsin in January 1992 a number of reforms were introduced as a type of economic shock therapy. They are widely regarded as a social disaster: “inexcusable from a moral perspective” (Chubarov 2001, 200) and “one of the greatest crimes committed against a democracy in modern history” (Klein 2007, 220). In a conversation about this time with Sveta’s parents at their dacha I mentioned that the logic behind the reforms was a kind of economic shock therapy. Sveta’s mother looked at me and simply said, “Nobody needs therapy like that.” In the early 1990s the hope that things would improve was replaced by the realization that they would not. “We thought that we’ll live better. We’ll throw away everything bad and we’ll improve everything. […] And then it happened that our generation, especially those in their forties, were simply sacrificed. People weren’t prepared at all to completely flip in that way to democracy . . . well to capitalism, because that didn’t smell like democracy.” They were not prepared for shock therapy. Middle-aged Muscovites, in particular, bore the brunt of the shock.
FREE MARKET MONETARISM

Keynesian economics, which advocates government regulation in the economy, dominated the global scene after World War II. With the economic slowdown of the 1970s the doctrine of the free market came to the fore. The roots of this approach lie in Milton Friedman’s free market monetarism. Friedman’s work at the University of Chicago spearheaded the Chicago School of Economics and garnered him a Nobel Prize in Economics in 1976. Friedman held that markets operated most optimally when unencumbered by government intervention, setting the stage for Reaganomics and Thatcherism in the 1980s.

Friedman’s tenets of deregulation, privatization, and cuts to social spending were first implemented in the latter 1970s as structural adjustment programs in Latin America—in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Friedman himself coined the term “shock treatment” on a visit to Chile in 1975 (Klein 2007, 81). The treatment came with side effects: inflation, unemployment, curtailed social services, increased poverty, and new forms of inequality. Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs applied similar principles to market reform in Bolivia before he moved to Poland and then Russia. Sachs’s approach, known as the big bang or shock therapy, was a bit more humane than that of the Chicago School. He believed economic reform should be accompanied by international aid and debt forgiveness. Unfortunately, by the time of shock therapy in Russia, the global community would not commit to anywhere near the amount of international aid necessary to preserve the country from economic collapse.

In the following I try to remain faithful to the perceptions of older middle-aged Muscovites, some of whom spoke about capitalism, the market, and government regulation, if not neoliberalism. Like the scholars Collier (2011) critiques, they employ labels as shorthand for complicated processes that were, in many senses, beyond the control of neoliberal ideologues and technocrats, whether Russian or foreign. I try to stay close to the everyday realities of the early 1990s—loss of work, unpaid salaries, shortages, rising prices, hunger, worthless privatization vouchers, poverty. These were the concerns of middle-aged Muscovites, many of whom were pragmatic. They cared about ideology when they discovered that ideology and its political-economic vehicles informed their social possibilities.
A COLLISION OF LOGICS

The dominant logic of Soviet socialism at the time this generation came of age was a radiant future (svetloe budushchee) built over time through Soviet labor. In Soviet ideology, history was progressive. A better life and a better society always lay ahead. It may have been necessary to sacrifice, but the ideology of a radiant future did not account for periods of regression. Regression was the fate of capitalist societies with their never-ending cycles of boom and bust. During their formative years, middle-aged Muscovites saw progress around them. With war as the backdrop, progress was evident in postwar reconstruction, the construction of Moscow, increased consumerism, and the scientific and technological revolution of the 1950s, including the accomplishments of the space program. In the 1960s, the expansion of housing served as further proof of Soviet progress.

The logic of economic shock therapy flew in the face of the Soviet ideal of progress. Neoliberal economics holds that “markets can spontaneously create a new world if the old can first be destroyed. Shock therapy’s package of price liberalization, stabilization, and privatization aims to dissolve the past by the fastest means possible. . . . It is neoliberalism’s pious hope that destruction is the vehicle for genesis” (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, 5).

In order for economic shock therapy to succeed, things had to get worse before they could get better. The fruits of Soviet labor—state industry in particular—had to be destroyed. Destruction, not construction, was the guiding logic, at least in the initial stages of reform.

According to Sachs, the Western author of shock therapy, the reason shock therapy did not succeed in Russia was because Russian technocrats were not thorough enough: “Despite the [sic] all of the uproar in recent years about ‘shock therapy’ in Russia, knowledgeable observers understand that it simply never occurred, an obvious point when one compares Russia’s disorganized and partial stabilization efforts with the decisive actions in the Czech Republic, Estonia, or Poland” (1995, 53). The implication is that what happened in Russia was not a Western-prescribed program of reform but a uniquely Russian endeavor. Russians are ultimately held responsible for the chaos of the 1990s.

Middle-aged Muscovites mourn what has been destroyed. At the same time, they contest the discontinuity that destruction projects onto their lives. In the chapter on work, Viktor and Vera, in particular, were adamant that
younger Russians were benefiting from the sacrifice and labor of older generations. Vera told Sveta, “You are still living on what our generation built.” And Viktor proclaimed that “All of present-day democratic Russia . . . rests on what that [wartime] generation built.” This couple refused to accept that their life work had been destroyed, even as they mourned the destruction of Soviet society and its social relations.

**SHOCK THERAPY**

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, young Russian and Harvard technocrats, headed by economists Yegor Gaidar and Sachs respectively, wasted no time in transforming Russia’s centralized socialist economy. The plan began with price liberalization and the withdrawal of state subsidies. With the end of price controls, the government expected prices to treble. In fact, they rose ten to twelvefold (Chubarov 2001). Inflation of consumer prices, which in 1992 rose 1,490 percent (World Bank 2013), meant that the price of basic necessities jumped steeply upward. People’s assets, accumulated over a lifetime, lost practically all of their value within a few months. People lost their savings. Among interviewees, lifelong savings of five, ten, and twelve thousand rubles were lost.

In tandem with these developments, there was a severe industrial contraction whereby production was halved in a matter of years (Chubarov 2001). Many people lost their jobs.

Even though we worked at those factories, I didn’t expect that it would flop. They suddenly failed. Yes, and I never even thought that industry would come to a stop.

Everyone was really nervous and suffered. Work was up in the air. [ . . . ] And where would they take you if everything was closed?

Whoever worked at factories, that was very . . . that was it. Everything was shuttered. [ . . . ] Everything fell apart into OOO [LLC, limited liability companies] and EEE or something—into those shreds.

Those who kept their jobs often were not paid or were paid in kind. People remembered not being paid for six, seven, and eight months. Official and partial unemployment peaked at 14 percent (Chubarov 2001)—a level that does
not account for those working without a salary. In a society where guaranteed employment was a basic tenet of social justice, this was previously unimaginable. Industry was the backbone of the Soviet economy. As the interviewee above said, “I never even thought that industry would come to a stop.” In many factories, it did indeed stop as the backbone of the Soviet economy was broken.

The shock of unemployment was not restricted to those who lost their jobs but affected everyone who understood that their work and basic needs were no longer secure and they were expendable. “I think it all happened, in part, uncontrolled. If they had told people that, ‘Your enterprise will go bust. You will be left without work. You will live on kopeks. They will even not pay anyone their salary for eight months.’ It was as if there was no money in the country. It was terrible.” Younger workers moved from one sector of the economy to another hoping to find the elusive higher salaries of a free market. “Many left in all directions. [. . .] But the older ones who were just under fifty [. . .] where would they go? There was a saying: ‘Thirty, maximum forty years old and that’s it.’” Older workers did not have the time to retrain, change specialties, or wait for industry to recover.

Inflation, unemployment, and salary arrears meant that the majority of Russians struggled to make ends meet, but the situation of the middle aged was especially dire as they saw their expected future evaporate. “I began to fight for my subsistence,” said one older man. They stopped eating meat and lived, in some cases, entirely on bread, potatoes, or macaroni. They sold odds and ends on the street for extra income. “There was nothing for people to live on. They began to sell, practically their silverware, all of that.” It was not simply that prices were rising and income was not rising to the same degree for the majority of the population. It was also that no one knew if or when it would end. “The hardest times were under Yeltsin when they didn’t pay my pension for half a year. They didn’t give my husband his salary. I was already [newly] retired. [. . .] If you eat some piece of meat you try to boil it and feed your husband—and myself some edge on a bit of bread. [. . .] Under Yeltsin tomorrow was on the whole a dead end.” Uncertainty, even fear, was augmented by an absence of state regulation and control. Levels of crime rose and the Russian mafia appeared on the streets to fill the vacuum, offering protection to businesses for a price. A prominent Moscow State University political scientist involved in polling at the time told me that the catchword was order (poriadok)—people simply desired a return to social
order and stability. “Many began to look back to Brezhnev’s days with nostalgia, realizing that stability in life had its own definite value and that, at times, ‘stagnation’ was more desirable than reforms and changes” (Chubarov 2001, 149).

Following price liberalization and withdrawal of state subsidies, public assets were privatized. Anatoly Chubais, under Gaidar, was in charge of privatization, which began with “voucher privatization” or “the people’s privatization.” Every Russian citizen would receive a voucher worth ten thousand rubles—an appreciable sum at the end of 1991 roughly equivalent to the value of a new Lada car. According to the plan, people would be able to cash in their vouchers or purchase shares in newly privatized enterprises in 1993. Unfortunately, by 1993, after a year of rampant inflation, the vouchers were next to worthless. In Chubarov’s assessment, “The result of Chubais’ voucher privatization was that all Russians for a moment became candidates for property ownership, only to discover the next moment that most of them were effectively excluded from owning a slice of the former state assets” (2001, 205). People sold vouchers for about forty rubles each wherever they found buyers. An early incarnation of the MMM financial pyramid scheme began to collect privatization vouchers in an investment scheme. “MMM invest turns your vouchers into gold!” promised the television advertisements (Hoffman 2003, 219). As one interviewee summarized:

Then they began to create . . . front men . . . those pyramids. For forty rubles people brought vouchers. You could turn them in there. One person sold them, another waited. Another sold them for a bottle. Everyone did whatever. And afterwards someone collected them and they privatized [state assets]. The result was they privatized all of our energy supply. In sum they fooled us. They lied to us. We never loved Chubais, we don’t love him, and we won’t love him.3

Margarita still has her vouchers; by the time she wanted to redeem them she could not find any organization accepting them. Her experience was not unique. “They gave us vouchers which we could never turn in anywhere.” Another interviewee simply said, “They shafted the people.”

In another privatization program shares were distributed to employees of enterprises. Management often bought back workers’ shares. One woman who had a personal connection to the head accountant of a clothing company
received a call from the accountant’s assistant. “‘Do you want to make a pretty penny?’ I said, ‘Who doesn’t want to?’ ‘Well, come,’ she said, ‘we’ll go tomorrow morning.’ So I was on the committee where we enumerated how many shares all of our workers, each one, had.” When she sold the stock she had received and purchased, she received three thousand rubles per share while, according to her, all the other “girls” received fifteen hundred. She received seventy-five thousand rubles and used a third of her windfall to buy a refrigerator and stove before putting away the rest for her burial. When she told this story to Ira, fifty thousand rubles were worth close to two thousand U.S. dollars. Ira, incredulous, asked her if she meant fifty thousand in today’s rubles. She did. She alluded to an agreement between managers.

Stanislav, a foreman in the electronics industry, described how vouchers were taken from the workers by factory directors and party bosses “who had connections to buy that factory for kopeks. [. . . ] Then bigger sharks bought them out or beat them out. Then it developed into whoever had the greatest possibilities, the most connections grabbed and sliced away.” In 1995 all pre-tense of “the people’s privatization” was dropped, and remaining state assets were auctioned off under a program dubbed loans-for-shares. Bankers and businessmen with connections to Yeltsin acquired the state’s assets for a pittance. This group became Russia’s oligarchy. Interviewees reserved much of their acrimony for the oligarchy. “Without any profession, he’s a millionaire, and for him you are . . . Who needs anyone anywhere? [. . . ] By means of what labor did they achieve it? Deceit! Speculation! And it is permitted—that is the question!” Compared to an increasingly wealthy oligarchy, ordinary workers’ social status was diminished. According to more than one interviewee, privatization was a crime. Millionaires stole their riches from the people without any retribution. One middle-aged Muscovite man ominously remembered a time when such people would have been shot.

There is some debate as to how much economic and social inequality actually increased during the years of economic shock therapy, since inequality was officially nonexistent in Soviet times. According to World Bank data, the Gini index, a measure of inequality in society where 0 represents complete equality and 1 complete inequality, was 0.24 in 1988 and reached its zenith in 1993 at 0.48. In 2009 it was 0.40, a value comparable to the United States (World Bank 2013). Of course, it is difficult to assess the validity of 1988 data and the comparability of these two figures. However, there is no doubt that inequality was much more visible.
IN THEIR OWN WORDS

This generation of Muscovites described the early 1990s as a time of collapse, upheaval, disorder, decay, wildness. The period itself was characterized by chaos, madness, mutiny, thievery, the grabbing of power and profit. It was “the organized destruction of a country” or “the crime of wild capitalism against organized socialism.” In their evocative phrasing, the fall of the Soviet Union and all that ensued was “a cultural revolution,” “the opening of another world,” “as if the world had burst open.” It meant “the loss of the sense of life,” “the loss of a future,” and “the decay of the spirit.” People experienced it as a radical upheaval of society. It was decidedly not reform. The word perestroika was a euphemism for something else—revolution, or worse. “As in one of our songs it is sung ‘To the foundation we destroy and then we’ll take it and build a new world.’” One Muscovite explained, “And it was . . . it was so-called . . . In my opinion it was not perestroika. It was simply an apocalypse. It was simply all devastation. Perestroika is when we make a new house from our old dacha, right? When we know what we want. But then nobody knew what, who, what they wanted.” When I told Professor Vladislav my interest in that time he asked me when I had first come to Russia.

Michelle: The first time was 1993.
Professor Vladislav: And did you see?
Michelle: Yes, I saw.
Professor Vladislav: The year 93 was very . . . the process, you saw it, right?
Michelle: Yes, I was in Peter [St. Petersburg].
Professor Vladislav: The feeling of decline, true, yes, even superficially—the dark streets, the drawn faces, yes, people poorly dressed, poorly lit [osveshchenny]. . .

People’s hopes that change would still bring a radiant future were well and truly extinguished by 1993.

As the Russian author of shock reform, Gaidar is widely reviled. Viktor, the secondary school history teacher, said that the country had been betrayed. “Although it was necessary to change—to put a market economy into place. But with government regulation. Name me one government with a market economy where the government relinquishes everything.” He referred to an interview in which Gaidar maintained that his program of price liberalization
saved Russia from famine, civil war, and extinction. He called that a lie. He thought Gaidar would do better to ask forgiveness of the Russian people. One man said he could not stand to see Gaidar. When he found out that Gaidar had been poisoned, but lived, at the end of 2006, he thought, “‘Why didn’t they poison him to the death?’ No, but [...] he grabbed money from the whole country, from each person. He did that and that’s why he will still answer for that on the Day of Judgment.” That day may have already come. Gaidar died in December 2009 at only fifty-four years of age of complications of cardiovascular disease.

The metaphors used to describe this time are instructive. The country “ran free” and people were “fish in muddy waters,” unable to see and easily duped by the government, banks, and schemes. “No leader appeared. No idea appeared. It was as if they sixed a sitting dog. They siced a dog and all hell broke loose, I think of it like that. And then the country ran loose. And on the sly whoever got their bearings, they started to catch fish in muddy waters.” Social norms became opaque. “Horrible, and people still didn’t understand anything. They rushed from one extreme to another. One person made a killing. Another didn’t. Everyone went their own way.” Some were like fish caught in “muddy waters”; some did the fishing. Ivan’s and Lidia’s accounts of this time highlight particular experiences of this generation in the early 1990s as their lives, along with the state and economy, were painfully transformed.

**Ivan**

I first met Ivan, an English teacher, at a meeting of the English club I attended in Moscow. He is a tall, lean man with a slight stoop. His dark hair is thinning in the back. He was polite and soft-spoken, but also excitable. On certain topics he became agitated and even angry. Besides teaching English at a secondary school and two institutes of higher education, he gives private English lessons to children from well-to-do families. He is married to a former student, twenty years his junior, and they have two young daughters. The second one was born during my stay in Moscow.

He was apologetic when he first invited me to his home in southeast Moscow. They have two very narrow adjoining rooms in a barrack, or a dormitory originally constructed for workers. When we stepped off the bus he pointed to where a bomb had blown up apartment buildings across the street in September 1999, one of a spate of apartment bombings that month in Russia. The staircase of Ivan’s building is wide and would be quite grand
were it not in such a state of neglect. There is litter strewn about; drywall and plaster covers the cement floor; graffiti covers the walls. The dank smell of alcohol and urine permeates the dim entryway. As is common in five-story buildings in Moscow, there is no elevator. There is a communal bathroom—where I once saw water running on an enormous pile of unattended laundry—and a communal kitchen on each floor of the building where occupants have an electric burner or two. This is where Ivan’s wife, Olya, sometimes cooks with her baby in a sling and her toddler on the floor nearby, although she prefers to use an electric steamer in one of their rooms.

The first time I visited them, Ivan exchanged words with his neighbor in the broad hallway. Electricity charges from 2004 either had or had not been paid by the neighbor. The cashier at the utility company told Ivan that the debt had not been paid. His neighbor, however, had already collected Ivan’s share of 575 rubles and shown him a receipt of payment. As we stepped inside the small private entryway connecting the two narrow rooms, Ivan told me his neighbors were uncultured and he preferred not to interact with them, but they would now need to arrange a time to visit the utility company together.

Before I conducted an interview with Ivan, I had not realized that he had ever been anything but an English teacher. Pointing to a collection of Lenin’s works on a shelf above the doorway, he told me that he taught secondary school history until 1991 when he was thirty-eight years old.

Ivan: But when perestroika began, I observed a lot of incorrect things, a lot of false things and I refused to teach history. I was left without bread.
Michelle: You refused?
Ivan: Yes, I refused.
Michelle: And why?
Ivan: Because of the many incorrect things, the many lies.
Michelle: For example?
Ivan: About the history of our country, and about the history of other countries. About world history. About capitalism and socialism. We already know how socialism ended. But we believed in it—really believed—and now it turns out that we were deceived and I refused to do history because it is lies. Each time history is rewritten under new leaders.

A few minutes later he explained: “I lectured, I taught, and what, it turns out, came out is that I taught lies. That which was written in books, that which
they taught us at [the institute], that is what I taught.” Ivan felt he couldn’t relearn and teach a new history if and when it ever came. “And I couldn’t anymore, simply reeducate myself again. Wait until everything is organized and truth is apparent. And I understood that truth would never come to light now. It will not be. Nobody knows that truth—how, what, which was. For that I need one more life to live out, and there is no more time. I was already too old.” The head teacher at the school suggested Ivan teach English instead. At first he was only one lesson ahead of his students, but he was motivated by the need to earn a living. He returned to university and received another degree in the department of foreign languages and then stayed on to teach there too.

Before the fall of the Soviet state, Ivan had a savings of ten thousand rubles, which likely represented seven to nine years’ base salary. He was waiting to be assigned an apartment. In a matter of a few months Ivan’s life savings was worth almost nothing, and there would be no apartment. With his savings, he bought a cheap jacket for two hundred rubles at the market, which still hangs in the closet. When I asked him to describe the early 1990s in two words Ivan said, ruefully, “the fall of the spirit.” The phrase is sometimes translated as despondency in English. “The fall of the spirit . . . and an absolute uncertainty about the future. There is no future.” I wondered if perhaps now, fifteen years hence, he saw a future for Russia. He raised his voice. “Russia has no future. Russia has no future.” Ivan is affronted by new economic inequality:

It is perfectly understood that a normal person working a full workday even . . . even sixteen hours like I do [ . . . ] . . . doing any honest work cannot earn billions, millions. It is possible to earn . . . Well how much? I don’t know. Well let it be even five thousand [U.S. dollars] per month—more than enough for our country. I would agree that they could earn five thousand. But millions per month is not possible in any normal, honest way. You can only steal that, like they did. They stole enterprises, they privatized. They took away our checks. I gave away a check and millions of people gave vouchers to savings banks. We thought they were specially organized, that we would receive profit. But they stole everything for themselves and consequently got those enterprises, plants, factories from the government.
He began to speak about Potanin, an oligarch who acquired his wealth by first proposing and then profiting from the loan-for-shares program.

He has a huge nickel production plant. That plant is worth, I don’t know, billions. From where does a person, one person, have enough money to buy that? Even if it were a low price. [. . .] It isn’t possible for a normal, simple person to get that somewhere and buy that. That is only attainable through theft. And that is how they [. . .] stole for themselves and calmly sit around pontificating about laws, about democracy.

Ivan told me that he did not mind if there were wealthy people as long as others could live “worthily, normally.” He thought it was absurd that some people living in poverty could not afford food and others were “swimming in fat.” “They do not know what to do with their money. They buy sports teams, yachts, the pyramids in Egypt.”

In the summertime Olya and the girls stay at the dacha 250 kilometers from Moscow where Ivan is building a modest country home. Ivan says he no longer has time to suffer. He only has time to survive, raise his girls, and construct the dacha. “A lot of people lost their spirit, lost their faith. They took to drink. They were unemployed, without food. There was nothing to live on. They were thrown out. Millions of people were thrown out on the street, from their work. They closed companies, factories. . . . What were people supposed to live on?” He told me, “I survived all of these hard years, fifteen years. I haven’t taken to drink.”

The fall of the Soviet Union represents a real rupture in Ivan’s life, and he was perhaps the most embittered person interviewed. Older respondents, while unhappy with their lot, were resigned to it in as far as they were now too old to do much about it. Ivan responded to the changes. He works long hours and is unable to provide as he would like for his family. Ivan told me that teaching was an acceptable career for a woman but not for a man. He claimed that most of his female colleagues were living on their businessmen husbands’ earnings.

Living in a barrack without much extra income has taxed Ivan’s marriage. More than once Ivan and Olya have separated. Olya feels Ivan is failing her as a husband. She wants a better life for herself and her children. For his part, Ivan doesn’t feel Olya fulfills her duties at home as a wife, cooking and
cleaning. At one point Ivan’s father-in-law told him that perhaps Olya would do more housework if she lived in a decent apartment—a prospect that looks increasingly unlikely given the rising values of Moscow real estate.

**Lidia**

Lidia’s experience was, in some sense, more harrowing than Ivan’s, but she was much less embittered. Lidia lived on the same plot of land where she was born, about thirty kilometers to the northwest of Moscow in the Moscow Oblast’ that surrounds the city. Lidia’s parents built the house in the 1960s. An electric train line ran behind the back fence of Lidia’s yard and stopped at a station about a kilometer away. A dirt road along the train line led the way back to the house.

The dark green wooden house was in the Russian country style with decoratively carved white window frames and white lace curtains. The yard was left to nature except for a small garden during the summer. In rain or during the spring thaw the yard filled with mud and visitors walked over wooden planks until they reached the front steps, which led up to a mudroom, full of shoes, boots, overcoats, and assorted Russian house slippers (tuflia) available for anyone. Beyond the entryway, there was a small kitchen, sitting room, and two bedrooms off the sitting room. During the year I visited, new wallpaper with green vertical vines was hung in the sitting room and a new dresser installed in the corner as part of preparations for the marriage of Lidia’s son. A few years earlier, pipes were installed for running water in the kitchen.

Lidia was not in good health. In her twenties, she spent half a year hospitalized and was officially disabled. She has been married twice to men who drank. Her second husband died of alcohol poisoning in 1990 when their second child was three years old. She worked at home for twelve years, often until two in the morning while her children were sleeping, knitting and sewing for a local factory that employed the disabled. In the early 1990s, the factory for the disabled was closed. When food coupons were issued for basics such as bread, meat, butter, and eggs, Lidia would leave her nine-year-old son in the bread line, which extended across the market square, while she took her five-year-old daughter shopping for other groceries. They went without meat.

Yet Lidia said, “Well, generally that perestroika time, because I am a homebody, it didn’t touch me very much. Because I’m like in my own little
world, in my circle. [It was] as if I were defended, in this shell, my house, my fortress.” She thought that women with families were protected to some extent. “If a woman has a family then, of course, it was easier for a woman. If she was without a family and a business woman, like they say now, then of course it was also hard because industry, everything completely changed.” Lidia described perestroika in terms of a loss of belief.

A person should always have belief in something, because only belief makes a person strong. And if during the Great Patriotic War only belief made a person strong—belief in meeting one’s loved ones—so in the times, so to say, before the Great October Revolution, belief was the foundation. There are those ideas like Old Believers, right? It is the fortress of the soul, spirituality. Belief, that is. They were united around this belief. Throughout time it was the foundation of a person’s life. So here, when there was no more socialist government and no belief in stability [ . . . ] everyone ran about [kidalis’]. And throughout time, man searches for somewhere to run [kinut’sia].

While kidat’sia (in the form kidalis’ above) has the sense of running amok, kinut’sia implies movement in a purposeful direction. Belief in a future—after the war, in the afterlife, in socialism—“makes a person strong” and gives a person “somewhere to run.”

Lidia was philosophical about the changes.

Well, it is like it always is in Russia. We destroy the old world. [ . . . ] And of course there are those who take advantage of the destruction. As always, when some try to do something and others try to pocket it all, to pilfer as much as possible. It is like that. Well, simply a collapse occurred and that’s it, nothing else, I think, a collapse—everything disordered. Before there was some sort of radiant future to hold on to, some sort of faith, although not in God. But something, in something, if only in a radiant future. As if we waited for something, especially in the year 2000 when they promised to give each person a separate apartment. [ . . . ] Yes, generally we all, yes, aspired to a better future, created that better future. And then we stopped aspiring to anything. The old values disappeared. Like in the beginning we had no God. Now that socialism, radiant future didn’t happen and nothing else has appeared on the horizon. And it has simply been a full collapse.
While society has changed around her, she thinks she herself has remained the same, struggling to make ends meet and care for her children. She prefers “everything sovkovoe,” or Soviet-style. “I have not yet restructured myself. And my kids also grew up without perestroika, still with that sovkovym mentality also. And that is why now it is very hard for them to integrate.” She and her family lived modestly, not far from the first Russian IKEA and a grandiose MEGA mall, which she had never seen.

**GENDER AND BEING NEEDED**

Ivan and Lidia both told me about difficult times in the early 1990s. Ivan lost savings, an expected apartment, and his career as a history teacher. Lidia lost her second husband and then her work. Yet they had very different reactions. Ivan is bitter about his losses and feels he cannot adequately provide for Olya and the girls despite his best efforts in the new economy. Lidia feels she was protected at home and has remained the same. Lidia receives some meager state support due to her disabled status, but this support does not do much to ease the poverty of her family. While these are but two individuals, their stories illustrate something about gender and being unneeded in the Russian context.

In Soviet times needed people were engaged in state work and social practices of redistribution of favors and goods. Thus they had something to offer the state and others around them. In the early 1990s this feeling may have been particularly compromised for men, who found themselves peripheral to state, industry, and family. Women, at least, were still needed to hold their families together. In a sense, Ivan is still needed, in that he is the sole breadwinner in his family. But it is also true that he feels he cannot offer Olya and his girls what he should be able to. He is still needed because he is still giving, but he is not giving enough. The threat of unneededness was palpable. He took solace in the things he could do—build a dacha, raise and protect his daughters.

In Russia, women are often regarded as more flexible, pragmatic, and long-suffering. Interviewees told me that Russian women were better equipped to confront hardship and social change. Russian women, they said, are resilient and hardy. Under the Soviet system, women’s double or triple burdens (LaFont 2001; Verdery 1996) meant that they worked outside the home and were also responsible for housework, children, and husbands.
They were used to the daily struggle to feed and clothe their families. Many interviewees felt that women’s central role in the family preserved them in the early 1990s. Interviewees disagreed whether this made the early 1990s harder for men or women. One woman claimed that it was harder for men in the early 1990s because it had always been easier for them. “It seems to me it was harder for men than women. Why? Because the harder yoke has always fallen to women.” Women were used to hardship. According to another woman, a man might drink and forget everything else, even his responsibility as breadwinner. Women’s cares were less easily forgotten. In this sense the early 1990s were harder for women because “she is the master at home.” “A man hopes his wife will figure it out,” said another interviewee. Vera, who described herself and her husband as children of the war, said: “The family hearth—everything depends on the woman, Sveta, and don’t believe anyone [else]. Everything, the happiness of the family, peace, quiet—that depends on the woman. However bad a man is, a woman can make anything out of him.” As Professor Vladislav said, women were now the saviors. Women were expected to fight for their family. “You always need to fight, always need to fight, most of all for your loved ones.”

The responsibility for children was central to the explanations of why women did better in the early 1990s. As one woman said, “A woman always, even if she loses her husband, she is still with her children and she doesn’t give up. She doesn’t give up. But a man somehow quickly loses interest in life.” Interviewees thought that family responsibilities gave women’s lives purpose and direction. “So a woman tries to be needed in whatever situation—to find herself somewhere where she is really needed. A woman keeps herself in hand. More so women who have children.” A woman is needed because others depend on her. One academic told me that women give and preserve life, and that is why they live longer than men. Rephrasing a verse from the Bible he explained, “Whoever saves the life of another shall live long.” Especially in the chaos of the early 1990s, women were needed more than ever.

Men, on the other hand, might lose themselves in times of difficulty. “With men it is more complicated of course. It is hard for a man to find himself.” In the early 1990s more men were peripheral to the state, industry, and daily family life; they were more likely to go adrift when they were not able to fulfill their role as breadwinner. “They closed factories, right, and something like that. And men . . . as changes [occurred] in the family life, a man
lay on the sofa and began to drink. That’s it. He lost his bearings and lost himself, and what was a woman to do? She conquered and began to hustle.”

Even if men retained their work and their salaries, their paychecks were no longer worth what they had been, in monetary or moral terms. Their status as breadwinner was diminished, especially in an environment where, by the mid-1990s, income inequality was glaringly obvious.

In the quotations above, women “find themselves” while men “lose themselves.” A woman tries “to find herself somewhere where she is really needed.” But, “It is hard for a man to find himself.” He loses “his bearings and [. . .] himself.” In one case “finding herself” is explicitly linked to being needed: “So a woman tries to be needed in whatever situation—to find herself somewhere where she is really needed.” Finding oneself, in English, has a connotation of realizing who one truly is and what one truly wants to do—to be in touch with a unique self, separate and apart from others. Here, the meaning is quite different. Finding oneself is tied to finding one’s place of neededness among others—having a sense of how others depend on oneself and knowing how important one is to others, especially family. People who have nothing to offer others are not connected to others and are in danger of being lost. The self here is constituted through relationships with others and thus can be lost without these relationships.

Women find themselves in their ability to give to others. In its most fundamental formulation this is about women’s ability to give and preserve life—by giving birth, of course, but also by raising children and sometimes by saving men from themselves. Men’s neededness—being needed by others—is more tenuous.

This talk, of course, portrays gender difference as natural, and reflects the particulars of Russian patriarchy and feminism. The point here is that women were still needed in the early 1990s because they had something to offer others. They could still make things happen for themselves and others. It is probable that the collapse of the economy compromised men’s social networks more than women’s, given the contraction of the industrial sector and the expansion of the service sector, where men and women, respectively, were disproportionately employed in Soviet times. Women’s access to consumer goods and services was particularly important during shock therapy. In addition, women may have been more likely to use their social connections during Soviet times to fulfill daily needs whereas men were more likely to have secured favors through state bureaucracy (Ledeneva 1998, 119–21).
In the early 1990s the state was defunct, but daily needs—food, clothing—still had to be satisfied.

Russian women have long found refuge from politics and the state in the family (Gal and Kligman 2000; Kürti 2000; Rivkin-Fish 2004; Watson 1993). Family-oriented traditionalism has been offered as an explanation for women’s relative resilience in terms of mortality (Palosuo 2000; Saburova et al. 2011; Watson 1995). Western feminism lacks appeal among many Russian women (Boym 2001; Bridger, Kay, and Pinnick 1996; Gal and Kligman 2000; Hemment 2004b; Kürti 2000; Verdery 1996; Watson 1993) who see it as a threat to the family (LaFont 2001). Russian women want more male participation in the family (Gal and Kligman 2000; Rivkin-Fish 2004) and are prepared to help their husbands achieve success (Meshcherkina 2000). To many Russian women a men’s movement makes more sense than a women’s movement (Boym 2001; du Plessix Gray 1989).

While women worked even harder to hold their families together, men were unable to financially support their families as before. In her ethnography of homelessness in St. Petersburg in the late 1990s, Höjdestrand found that “many homeless men seemed to think that the incapacity to perform the conventional breadwinning functions justified a total abandonment of family life as such, even in cases involving motherless children” (2009, 127). Women’s responsibility of caring for others may have preserved them even as it burdened them. Men lost themselves without much to give to others—when they felt unneeded.

**INEQUALITY**

Another theme explicitly emphasized in Ivan’s account is increasing social inequality. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this generation struggled to make sense of new wealth and blatant socioeconomic inequalities. Vast personal fortunes were amassed during the years of shock therapy. To a generation raised with the ethic of socially useful work, this seemed criminal and immoral. In 1992, Russians began to refer to the “nouveaux riches,” but this early inequality was mild compared to the class of elite businessmen, bankers, and oligarchs that emerged in 1994 and 1995.

Older Muscovites struggled to make ends meet during the early 1990s. Their struggle took place in a city of increasingly ostentatious inequality. The inequality may have been just as important as the struggle itself. Although
social inequality had existed in Soviet society, the logic of inequality had changed from access to goods and favors to the accumulation of wealth for conspicuous consumption. This new logic asserted itself most forcefully in the urban space of Moscow where power has long been concentrated. New wealth was flaunted, maligning Soviet ideals, especially for the generations that had come of age after the Great Patriotic War at the height of the Soviet state. Referring to Brezhnev’s time, a time of growing cynicism, one man said:

At least then during the stagnation we all lived roughly alike. Of course the managing workers, especially in the communist branch, all the party organizers and so on and higher . . . but then we didn’t have . . . not large-scale, not large-scale. All the rest were roughly living the same. When someone had a good profession, he received more. But now the people have just lost their conscience.

Professor Vladislav told me about a sense of estrangement or alienation that arose between people with the advent of the “cult of money.”

Wilkinson’s work on inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Wilkinson 1994, 1996, 2005) proposes that relative deprivation is more important than absolute deprivation in predicting life expectancy in industrialized countries. Income inequality explains health disparities between developed countries as well as within those countries. This position, while not without its detractors (Deaton 2003), emphasizes the deleterious effects of inequality on social relations, eroding trust, respect, and reputation.

Income inequality is but one form of inequality that affects health. Status goes beyond income. Michael Marmot headed the Whitehall studies in the United Kingdom which demonstrated graduated differences in mortality among civil servants according to employment grade. Since then, evidence for a social gradient of health has accumulated from around the world. In his book, The Status Syndrome, Marmot (2004) points to the importance of autonomy and social participation in explaining the gradient.

The World Health Organization’s Commission on Social Determinants of Health, chaired by Marmot, reports: “Poverty is not only lack of income. The implication, both of the social gradient in health and the poor health of the poorest of the poor, is that health inequity is caused by the unequal distribution of income, goods, and services and of the consequent chance of leading a flourishing life” (CSDH 2008, 31). The final report of the commission identifies material circumstances, social cohesion, psychosocial factors,
behaviors, and biological factors as mediators between socioeconomic status and health (CSDH 2008).

In epidemiology, social cohesion and psychosocial factors go by many different names. Social cohesion includes social capital, or civil society (Solar and Irwin 2007). Psychosocial factors include life events, job strain, job insecurity, perceived control, locus of control, coping style, social support, and social exclusion. Many of these variables have been used in studies on mortality in Russia. However, in an interim report of the WHO commission Solar and Irwin identify a key weakness of this literature: “It has become commonplace among population health researchers to acknowledge that the health of individuals and populations is strongly influenced by SDH [social determinants of health]. It is much less common to aver that the quality of SDH is in turn shaped by the policies that guide how societies (re)distribute material resources among their members” (2007, 21). In other words, the variables mentioned above become attributes of individuals and their communities rather than attributes of political economy. It is also true that, in an era of globalization, policies are situated in the global economy. Shock therapy in Russia is an especially good example of how political and economic policies result from a particular global history.

SHOCK THERAPY AND MORTALITY

No account of excess deaths in Russia would be complete without the historical backdrop of the rise of neoliberal capitalism on the global stage from the 1970s onward. The collapse of the Soviet Union only served to further the arguments for a free market economy with less government regulation. By the early 1990s shock therapy was considered a proven strategy of economic reform.

Mortality increased most steeply in 1992 and 1993 (Shkolnikov, Cornia et al. 1998). In a recent study, mass privatization—the transfer of at least 25 percent of large state-owned industries to the private sector—was associated with mortality among working-age men across countries of the former Soviet Union (Stuckler, King, and McKee 2009). The authors estimate three quarters of the increase in Russian adult male mortality between 1992 and 1994 may be attributable to mass privatization. During these years over half of all state-owned enterprises were privatized. The authors address the Western architect of economic shock therapy directly.
In a famous essay, and a series of other papers setting out the shock therapy package, Jeffrey Sachs argued that, “the need to accelerate privatization is the paramount economic policy issue facing Eastern Europe. If there is no breakthrough in the privatization of large enterprises in the near future, the entire process could be stalled for years to come. Privatization is urgent and politically vulnerable.” Did slow privatization hurt the prospects for capitalism? Is Slovenia—one of the most gradual privatisers—any less capitalist than is Ukraine? In fact, by approaching transformation rapidly and radically, prospects for western-style capitalism might have been seriously impaired in countries like Russia. Countries that privatized more slowly managed to reach a capitalist endpoint but did not absorb nearly the same amount of social costs along the way. (Stuckler, King, and McKee 2009, 406)

Stuckler, King, and McKee suggest unemployment mediated the relationship between shock therapy and mortality, noting that unemployment meant more than the loss of a job “in view of the wider parts played by firms from the former Soviet Union in provision of housing, education, childcare, and preventive health care” (2009, 405). Other studies also point to unemployment as a driver of mortality. Walberg and colleagues (1998) use regional data to propose a model of increased mortality in areas with a combination of high labor-force turnover, crime, and inequality. Perlman and Bobak (2009) use statistical models to test the associations between mortality and self-reported unemployment, wage arrears, compulsory leave, payment in goods, and job insecurity. But only compulsory leave among women was significantly associated with mortality during the study period from 1994 to 2003.8 It seems that unemployment, while undoubtedly important, is only one part of the story.

New forms of social inequality undercut a Soviet generation’s identity with roots in the shared sacrifices of war and reconstruction. It also marked Soviet achievements as misguided, worthy of abandonment or destruction. By extension, Soviet workers did not feel valued. There is a holistic story that ties together global, Soviet, and Russian political economy and Soviet and Russian social relations; ideas about sacrifice and collectivity; socially useful work and social connections; and gender and inequality. The position of not having anything to give, of being unneeded, is central. In the early 1990s Russia the country itself had nothing to offer the world; in fact, it
was desperately in need of foreign aid. The destruction of the state and its economy compromised social relations, which were enmeshed in the organization of the state. Changes in the global political economy, then, resulted in the most intimate and fatal repercussions for individuals.

It is one thing to describe social turmoil and another to delineate how this results in disease and death of individuals. Clearly, an epidemiology that restricts risk factors to the attributes of individuals or their communities is necessary but insufficient to tell the story of Russian mortality. In the next chapters we return to mortality and an anthropological reading of the epidemiology of the mortality crisis.