

SUFFERING, PITY AND PRIDE:
COMPLEXITIES OF THE RUSSIAN-AMERICAN ADOPTION
RELATIONSHIP FROM THE EARLY 1990'S TO 2007.

A
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Abstract

This thesis describes and analyzes the Russian-American adoption relationship between the early 1990s and 2007. In the early 1990s, a Non-Governmental Organization report depicting Russian orphanages provided Americans with pitiful images of Russian orphaned children. The report became iconic and shaped the way Americans perceived Russian orphans and orphanages. For the rest of the 1990s, Russian children became one of the most popular adoption choices for American parents; these children had the “right” race and could be “saved”. In 2005, news started to surface that adopted Russian children had been murdered in the U.S. by American adoptive parents. The Russian government responded to this news by placing a moratorium on all foreign adoptions. American adoption practices have, in many ways, hurt the pride of Russians. The perceptions Americans have of Russia as a “third world” country, and the perceptions Russians have of Americans as “greedy Westerners”, influenced the dynamics of this intercountry adoption relationship over the course of fifteen years. In 2007 the ban was lifted, but the relationship had changed significantly due to the shifting priorities of American adoptive parents and the dynamics of U.S.-Russian international relations.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In 2005, a Russian newspaper source reported that, “society has been shocked by the notorious trials of adoptive mothers from the U.S.” (MosNews 2005). This alarm resulted from the report of thirteen murder trials occurring in the United States. The people on trial were American adoptive parents who had murdered their adopted Russian children. In Russia, these stories quickly spread across national newspapers and other media, as government officials from the Ministry of Education angrily called for a moratorium to end American adoptions. One official is quoted saying, “Thirteen Russian children were killed in the United States ... nothing of that kind has happened in European countries. It is necessary to place a moratorium on the country” (MosNews 2005). While a ban on American adoption was on the minds of Russia’s government and public, the murders were virtually unknown to Americans. Little to no American media reported the murders of Russian adopted children. But, in the meantime, American families continued to adopt orphaned children from Russia and other “donor” countries. This summarizes recent events that have tarnished the Russian-American adoption program. But, most importantly, it is a reflection of the worsening political and social relationship between Russia and the United States.

This thesis is about the Russian-American adoption relationship. This connection started in the early 1990s, came to a preliminary halt in 2005, and ends with re-licensing adoption agencies in 2007. Images of Russian orphaned children have influenced Russian and American perceptions of adoption and most importantly, provide evidence for how each society perceives the other when it comes to adoption. In order to

demonstrate how this relationship has developed over time, I focus on three specific time periods: (a) the dismantling of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s when foreign adoptions began, (b) the 2005 moratorium and the news coverage of the murders of Russian orphans in the United States, and (c) the re-licensing of foreign adoption agencies to NGOs in 2007. From the exposure of orphanage life to the world by American human rights groups, to the Russian government's moratorium on foreign adoptions in 2005-2006, the Russian orphan has become a fixation in the way Americans perceive orphaned children.

For predominantly white American families and intercountry adoption advocates in the United States, Russian orphans are seen as children in desperate need of a stable home. In contrast, some people in Russia, especially government officials, have argued that orphaned children are a national resource that should be kept within the country. This latter view of orphans as a resource does not reflect a Russian sentiment toward orphans; rather, it is a highly politicized viewpoint that belied an increasingly negative national sentiment against Americans.

In 2005, two particular murder cases, those of Nina Hilt and Alex Pavlis, erupted in the Russian media, unraveling before the public the many problems of intercountry adoption; unfit parents, corrupt officials and an unstable but rapidly expanding adoption program. The Russian reports that adopted orphans were being murdered by their American parents became an opportunity to dismantle the intercountry adoption relationship. I specifically focus on the phenomenon of these Russian adoptee murders in the United States as a way to analyze how the murder stories generated anger and anxiety for Russians and Americans, and how it negatively affected the adoption

relationship between these two nations.

How does the Russian-American adoption relationship highlight the complexities of intercountry adoption? The focus on this particular relationship between Russians and Americans shows how cultural ideals of how to raise orphans can become political. The media plays a role in how various cultural factors and geopolitical considerations reach people through visual and descriptive imagery. While American and Russian media have had both positive and negative impacts on adoption, I am not making any claims as to what that exact impact was. In this thesis, I discuss the Russian and American media reports of the murders as reflections of already existing social and political viewpoints about adoption. But, I argue that these reflections exhibit a struggle in the power relationship between the Russian "donors" and American "receivers". By looking at media representations of Russian-American adoption and bringing in data from my own short-term fieldwork in the Russian Far East, I describe these factors as developing in parallels with the worsening relationship between the U.S. and Russia.

1.2. Intercountry Adoption

Intercountry adoption would not exist without the relationship between "sending countries" (Pertman 2000; Volkman 2005) and "receiving countries" (Pertman 2000). The list of "sending countries", also referred to as "donor" countries, has changed considerably since WWII, when Americans first began adopting children from war-torn nations of Europe and the Far East (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2007; Pertman 2000). Adam Pertman, an adoption advocate of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute has researched the history of adoption in the United States, offering a

statistical glimpse into how Americans have played a role in the building of intercountry adoption since WWII, “from 1948 to 1953, Americans adopted 5,814 children from Germany, [and] ... they adopted 2,418 Asian children, about two thirds of them Japanese” (2000:54). Willing American couples opened their homes to war orphans of both white and Asian descent, thus beginning a growing practice of helping parent-less children from regions suffering from economic, political and social strife. Western European nations and Japan are no longer on the list of sending countries as their economies have stabilized greatly since WWII.

In the 1990s the list of sending countries started to include China, Russia, Guatemala, Ukraine, Romania, Vietnam, and Kazakhstan, nations that became particularly “active players on the transnational adoption stage” (Volkman 2005). Today, this list largely remains the same but countries like Ethiopia and India are growing in their “sending” numbers (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2007). Before this time period, South Korea was the number one sending country to the United States since the peninsula was in a war. Even though Korea remains a sending country today, its place at the top of the list has been replaced by China and Russia.

The United States has typically responded to times of war, political, economic or social strife, and state policy change by adopting children. The United States is not alone in this phenomenon, as other Western nations, like Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany have also participated in similar adoption programs. Intercountry adoption most often represents a power relationship between “first world” nations and “third world” nations. These relationships typically begin with a crisis, since “first world” nations usually have the resources to monetarily help families, set up agencies and

provide help for adopted children. How adoption relationships end is a different story. For some nations the popularity of their adoption program is declining, the “donor” country can no longer provide enough infants, boys or girls to meet American demands, or the “donor” country decides to shut down the program altogether due to the dislike of Westerners, especially Americans, adopting (Pertman 2000).

For every “donor” country the adoption situation is different. Why children are abandoned and given up for adoption varies, culturally and politically. In every “receiving” country, abandonment is something presented to adoptive parents in brochures, which display information that typically includes some of the reasons why children are abandoned. Usual reasons include: economic difficulties, single motherhood, poor health, abuse with alcohol or drugs or racial/gender issues of the child that leads a family to encourage the mother to abandon it (Issoupova 2000).

Orphaned children become desired objects through the marketing of adoption to potential parents. The use of images of adoptable children help parents in the decision-making process, who then adopt the child after a large amount of money is paid for his/her safe delivery to the West. As “donor” countries supply children, they also receive some kind of aid from “receiving” countries; monetary support for orphanages, medical supplies, food, or clothes for children who either cannot be adopted or are waiting to be adopted (Pertman 2000). Aid is not always sent on behalf of adoption agencies and parents, but also from churches, charities and various child advocacy groups. Most of those involved in adoption benefit, as Lisa Cartwright states, “waiting parents got children, orphans got families and homes, and struggling orphanages and local government ministries got subsidies in the form of adoption fees euphemistically

termed 'charitable donations'" (2005:185). But, even though monetary donations are seen to do 'good,' the perceptions that outsiders have of the "donor" countries may be negative, as the society is seen to be "unfit" for taking care of its own children.

1.3 Theoretical Approaches

1.3.1 Anthropology and Adoption

In a 1994 article reviewing previous anthropological research on adoption, John Terrell and Judith Modell write that, "studying adoption can also be a way of discovering the meanings and implications of aspects of culture and social order that remain problematic for both anthropologists and the public" (1994:159). They suggest that in earlier times, anthropological interest in adoption focused solely on kinship. Adoption as a topic of inquiry played more of a "peripheral role in anthropology: as a way of illuminating a kinship system, or as a way of understanding transmission of property" (1994:157). Perhaps one of the issues surrounding understandings of adoption was that the term was relative to the culture in which the practice, or transaction, was being observed. Terrell and Modell continue to say that for anthropologists, the treatment of adoption in the literature gives the sense that the term is rather "non-problematic," since the "transaction of a child, evidently, is not considered either a major social event or a key cultural text; rather, child exchange is analyzed as 'only' an aspect of kinship, form of social solidarity, or response to demographic conditions" (1994:158). The rather common practice of intercountry adoption in the United States seems to mostly be a "response to demographic conditions," as Terrell and Modell mention, but it

is *also* a major “social event,” as the development of a family is seen as something to be celebrated; socially, culturally and personally.

Terrell and Modell suggest that the “non-problematic” view toward the practice could be a result of the “conservatism about our methods and categories of analysis” (1994:158). They say that adoption as a category of meaning is problematic because it is a variable concept; it does not mean the same thing for all cultures. What “receiving countries” perceive as the meaning of adoption does not translate to how “donor countries,” or countries not affiliated with any adoption program, see adoption. Intercountry adoption is filled with varying cultural views of the practice, but what have brought them all together in both “successful” and turbulent relationships, are orphaned children. With the growth of intercountry adoption in the last two decades, research on adoption has dramatically increased as anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, advocates, journalists and human rights officers have covered events occurring within the adoption world.

Terrell and Modell (1994) do not discuss reasons for abandonment or how orphans endure their everyday experiences on streets or in institutions. While the topic of adoption was treated as “non-problematic”, when they were writing, since the end of the 1990s when intercountry adoption reached its peak many problems have surfaced.

The anthropological study of adoption today should address how people perceive each other in the intercountry adoption system. The way in which people interact with one another ultimately affects what happens to an orphaned child. However, human interaction across borders is rather rare in the intercountry adoption system. Most transactions are processed through the mail and the Internet by agencies

and NGOs. The only perceptions people gain of donor and recipient countries is through media reports. So far, what has been occurring is a push for change in the system by amending laws and the way in which those laws affect the movement of orphans from Russia to nations abroad.

In this thesis I use the works of anthropologists who have focused their research on the perceptions of orphaned children and adoption practices in Russia, Morocco, and the United States. Terrell and Modell are not the only anthropologists who have studied adoption, but rather, present an interesting review of research conducted before the article's publication in 1994. Their article and the other literature presented in this thesis show that adoption reflects social and cultural viewpoints.

1.3.2 Adoption in Russia

In Russia, there is a public discourse about the characteristics of the parents of orphans. The social ills of alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, and child neglect that underly child abandonment by parents are thought by many to be passed on and embodied by orphans. Because of this, there is a Russian cultural idea that orphans possess "bad blood" (Fujimura et al. 2005). The children become marginalized, set aside and institutionalized. Anthropologist Clementine Fujimura and her collaborators argue that such children are put into orphanages so that society can cope with them. She recalls, "according to the caretakers in the Moscow orphanage where I resided and at other orphanages I visited, the best way to handle 'bad blood' is to train an orphan as one might an animal; this method enables an orphan to cope with society" (2005:19). The concept of embodied marginality is relevant to the issue of intercountry adoption

because it presents orphans and social orphans as people who are cast aside from Russian society and made available to other societies through the process of adoption.

'Bad blood' is a prevalent concept in anthropological literature about abandoned children in Russia, and also in Morocco (Fujimura et al. 2005, Bargach 2002, Rockhill 2004). The driving force behind this cultural notion, or social stigma, is the belief that orphans are "genetically deficient," that they *biologically* possess the problems of their parents (Fujimura et al. 2005, Bargach 2002). If a Russian family were to adopt an orphan, they would adopt these problems, becoming stigmatized as a family. They would also carry another kind of social stigma: the strangeness of the inability or unwillingness to produce their own biological children. Sometimes women adopt orphans so that they will not be the 'talk of the town' for not having children, but at the same time, there is a fear that they will in fact be the 'talk of the town' since they have chosen to adopt an orphan. Because of this, some women or families opt to move to another town or city so that nobody knows about their adoption (Fujimura et al. 2005, Rockhill 2004).

These notions surrounding orphaned children consequently lead toward them becoming a marginalized population as they are placed into institutions. The orphanage buildings themselves are 'gray,' unmarked and hidden behind gates or fences. Nevertheless people do know what it is and who lives inside. It is as if the orphanage is a public secret, a building encompassing a stigma (Taussig 1999).

In Jamila Bargach's ethnography about orphanages and adoption in Morocco, she describes orphanages as invisible spaces since they are usually located off-shore on islands. Orphanages in Russian cities like Moscow and St.Petersburg are spread

throughout the urban and even suburban landscape. Orphanages are not solely limited to urban areas; they are also found in rural Russia. Urban orphanages typically receive the most attention from anthropologists, sociologists, journalists and activists because they exemplify popular understandings of what an orphanage is. As an American who carried the perception that all orphanages were regimented, the story of *Oliver Twist* came to my mind as a prime example of this assumed American perception of orphanages. The story was a basis for my, and perhaps the larger American, mental image of an orphanage: overcrowded, dark, and neglected.

1.3.3 Perception and "Pity Politics"

Luc Boltanski, in his book *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (1999), describes the spectacle of suffering as the "observation of the unfortunate by those who do not share their suffering, who do not experience it directly, and who, as such, may be regarded as fortunate or lucky people" (1999:3). In the adoption world, American perspectives of abandoned, homeless and institutionalized children are a spectacle that conjures up strong emotions in parents and adoption advocates, creating an attachment to these children whom they have never met. Emotions are transformed into actions, such as the launching of humanitarian aid missions to orphanages in Russia bringing charitable items like clothing and toys for children. Perceptions about "those who suffer" continue to persist in today's world where there exist strong American ambitions to help the unfortunate.

Boltanski writes that the relationship between the fortunate and unfortunate creates a "politics of pity" (1999:4). Pity invokes emotion affected by distance (1999:6). In

politics of pity, “good fortune and misfortune are conditions that define separate groups ... it regards the unfortunate together en masse ... it is necessary to single out particular misfortunes from the mass in order to inspire pity” (1999:4). The politics that emerge from pity is a sense of action. This can be exercised by physically doing something to end suffering or speaking about suffering in order to make misfortunes better known. In this thesis, Russian orphaned children are the ones who are suffering, and Americans adoptive parents are the ones who feel pity. The actions that have ensued from this constellation of pity are aid, advocacy and adoption.

1.3.4 “Hurt Pride”

A 1998 article published by the American magazine *Russian Life*, entitled “Adoption from Russia: A War of Perceptions,” discusses the increasing number of Russian children being adopted by American parents. But most importantly, it presents insight into how Russians view American adoption and what it means to them. This article is interesting and unique because it somewhat discourages Americans from adopting Russian children. The writer of this article, Colin Cummings (1998), does not dismiss the idea that adoption does help children gain a family and a home, but he interviews missionaries who would rather see Americans help the state of orphanage life in Russia by sending donations. Cummings writes, “The immediate needs of thousands of children are in danger of becoming obscured by the hurt pride and frustration of Russians and by Americans’ fear that these orphans are irreparably damaged” (1998:10). These factors have made the Russian-American adoption relationship very challenging.

There is a much larger issue at hand when discussing the cultural differences about perceptions of Russian adoption. Cummings continues to describe that Russians have,

a bruised sense of national pride, a feeling that Russia is being treated like a third-world country, and shame that the state is unable to care for its children, and it is not difficult to understand why some Russians have developed negative sentiments for international adoption [1998:10].

On top of this, Cummings writes that Russia is “wary of allowing international bodies to dictate internal functions of the state” (1998:14). The rush of humanitarian aid and adoption campaigns from the West allowed some practices to get out of Russian control. In the early 1990s, Russians were in an economically, politically and socially vulnerable state. Adoption became one facet of the power relationship between “first-world” and “third-world” nations, as Americans started adopting thousands of children. Russia did not want to be labeled as a “third world” nation, but, according to American perceptions, it clearly was one.

The American perception that Russians continue to live as a “third-world” nation has been especially problematic since the 1990s ended. Americans continued to adopt Russian children with the perception that they were helping people in a “third-world” nation. Russians do not see adoption as aid from a “first-world” nation, but instead, see it as a “baby business”, a way for Americans to have some kind of control or influence in Russia (Cummings 1998:14).

1.4 Sources

1.4.1 Fieldwork - Russian Far East, 2006

Ethnographic research for this project was carried out in July and August of 2006 in the Russian Far East. Experiences in the city of Khabarovsk and the rural village of Karsakova were especially vivid since it was in this village and city I was able to visit an orphanage, a summer camp, and children's parks in the city center. The observations made at a small village orphanage and the conversations held with missionaries, directors and lawyers gave me an idea of the sentiment that both Russians and Americans have toward intercountry adoption. I was able to talk about some orphanage issues with several people who play an important role in the maintenance and administration of the institution. Every person with whom I spoke represented some aspect of the adoption system, whether it was the business, administrative or humanitarian side.

Upon arrival in the Russian Far East, I first met an American lawyer in Vladivostok who manages a Russian adoption NGO in Anchorage, Alaska. Even though his visit was part of a research trip on economic development in the Russian Far East, the information he was able to share with me about how adoptions work gave me a first impression of the business aspect in this system. The lawyer was able to connect me with Russian officials who administer all orphanages in Khabarovskii Krai. Meeting the directors, who were all female¹, was something I would not have been able to do on my own in such a short, preliminary visit. The American lawyer invited me to a meeting with the directors and suggested them as potential research connections. However, prior

¹ In Creuziger's (Fujimura) ethnography *Childhood in Russia* (1996), she explains that most of the orphanage staff is female. It is very rare to find male workers connected to the orphanage.

to our meeting with the directors, I was warned by the lawyer not to mention the research I was interested in pursuing. It was advised that it would be best not to talk about my ideas due to the news of Russian orphans being harmed overseas. This caution turned out to be a significant moment in my research; even though I was not able to communicate with them effectively due to language issues, I could sense that the directors were not happy with the American lawyer's visit or my presence. I assume the lawyer wanted to meet with the director alone, but she had invited five other women to listen to our meeting, even though they did not say anything. After about fifteen minutes, the meeting was over and we were rushed out of the building. Although I did not say anything, the carefully chosen diplomatic words exchanged between the lawyer and director said something more. This meeting with the directors, as well as with the lawyer, gave me exposure to the political aspects of the adoption system. Moments like this reflect how the movement of children through the adoption system can affect interactions on this administrative and bureaucratic level between people in "receiving" and "donor" countries. Since reports of American parents harming children had been exploding in the Russian media, there was an obvious tension that could not be ignored.

I was able to spend time with missionaries and orphanage directors during another set of meetings that formed an important basis for this research. The missionaries were from various states in America, and have been working at a small orphanage outside of Khabarovsk for over a decade. They have become close friends with the orphanage director. In meeting the missionaries, I was able to gain some understanding of how the orphanage functions: when the children go to school, what their daily schedule is, what is expected of their behavior inside the orphanage, and

what they are allowed to do outside of the institution if they have relatives nearby.

When visiting the orphanage and spending time with the orphans on a field trip, I was able to see a more humanitarian side of the adoption system, but also to see that the commitments made by these foreign missionaries to the orphanage have been rewarded with life-long friendship and loyalty. On being asked about adoption with this particular orphanage, a sense of resentment toward the system was felt from the staff and the missionaries. That sense was mostly in response to the business side of the system, based on sour experiences with lawyers who facilitate adoptions to America. I learned that even though adoptions are sometimes considered good for the future of the children, the bureaucratic aspects of the system are seen as problematic by the employees. In this they showed a certain concern about where orphans are going, whether they become adopted or not. In discussing the future of orphans in Russian society, the missionaries put a strong emphasis on the importance of helping the orphans gain higher education, find jobs, and have a stable life outside the orphanage once they graduate at age sixteen.

Spending time with children on a fieldtrip and at a summer camp provided additional insights.² When I visited the orphanage with the missionaries some children were there. They wished to stay at the orphanage instead of going to the summer camp, and helped staff members repair some things around the building. As a gift, the missionaries took them on a boat tour of the Amur River. There were about seven children altogether, plus the missionaries and I. The missionaries bought chips and soda as snacks on the boat ride. Once we were on the boat, everyone was very quiet; the

² During this visit I was not studying children, but rather the people who work with them, notably missionaries and orphanage staff. I was invited to participate in the field trip and summer camp visit with the missionaries, an opportunity I could not decline. To the children I was simply a visitor.

children would sit with their friends and either watched the T.V. that was playing Russian pop music, or look outside the window at the other summer tourists. The boat was very crowded with families enjoying an afternoon outing. Many other children were on the boat, and I could not help but notice how the children would watch them with blank stares. As a way to break the ice, I pulled out my camera and asked one of the girls to take a photograph of whatever she found interesting, and I would give her a copy. Almost immediately, the other children were glued to the camera, as I let them take photographs of each other, and I took their requests to have pictures taken of them. Since the camera was a mode of communication between them and me, they began to feel more comfortable with my presence very quickly. Perhaps it was the interest I took in them as children, and not as orphans, that they pulled me into their group as we toured the boat together, without the missionaries. I was curious about how much freedom they had to act as children when they are in the orphanage, and how quickly they must have learned to grow up. I was also curious if they instinctively act a certain way around complete strangers who visit the orphanage.

On a separate trip to a summer camp, I visited all of the other children from the village orphanage. At this summer camp many children, who were not all orphaned, spent weeks playing games and doing outdoor activities together. In the house where the children were sleeping, the building was split in half, so that the boys and girls were separate from each other. Once we arrived, they were excited to see the missionaries, who came with soda and candy bars. They hugged them and said they missed the orphanage and asked how everyone else was. The short time we spent at the summer camp involved playing games with the children who were eager to play tricks on me,

the new foreigner. They were very cheerful and a pleasure to be around. They did not understand who I was and why I was there; I assume they just thought I was another American visiting Russia, as the missionaries told me that during the summer they often received many American visitors from churches in the U.S.

My experiences at the summer camp and at the field trip reshaped my previous stereotype of Russian orphanages: that relationships in orphanages are strictly regimented and that nobody cooperated with each other. In Karsakova, I was pleasantly surprised to see that I was wrong, but I think I was even happier that I was able to see for myself the environment of this particular orphanage that did not fit the cold, dreary model that had been said to characterize so many other orphanages.

1.4.2 Newspapers

Newspapers that report cases of American parents murdering or abusing their Russian adopted child were an essential part of this research. The emphasis on current reports is due to the fact that this research captures a very specific time in Russia where much change was occurring at a rapid pace. Newspaper articles document the issues that were happening of the time in the adoption community. An analysis of these newspaper articles shows what the two adoption discourses –Russian and American– have been presented in response to the changes being made in adoption.

Internet Russian news sources (Moscow News, Russian News and Information Agency Novosti, Komsomolskaya Pravda) were vital for this project. These articles were used to examine stories about American parents abusing/murdering their Russian adopted child. The articles document several things: public opinion, policy, and the

public and government response to the adoptee murder cases. They also document changes in public opinion toward orphans and adoption. Since my major limitation in this project is the short fieldwork period, using Russian Internet sources to find articles in response to the adoption scandals was crucial for understanding what is happening there now. American newspaper articles were also important for this project. They were used to delve into the specific murder cases, to see what reasons were given to explain each murder, typically an explanation of why the connection between parent and child failed. But most importantly, these articles are important for documenting how many cases there were, and how these cases have been presented in American media.

By analyzing the way news agencies covered these cases, and how adoption advocates and governments have been responding to media coverage, I gathered information directly from Russia and the United States to understand what the responses have been from both societies, and what solutions are being encouraged to amend the problems.

One thing that the Russian and American articles show is that the American way of adoption is not always perceived as good. These cases have been influential enough to change the entire adoption system in Russia. However, the cases have not exploded in American news, as they did in Russia. Evaluation of the wrong that has occurred has been little discussed; usually the focus surrounds the adoption agencies that facilitated the adoption, and not the parents who murdered their child. Moreover, hardly any discussion has been found on how Americans can become more aware of the problems in the intercountry adoption system.

1.4.3 Websites / Online Directory of "Adoption in Russia"

An analysis of several websites and blogs representing organizations and parents involved in the adoption process was conducted to show perceptions of adoption and the "other". For example, the Russian directory "Adoptions in Russia", and American blogs by people who have adopted from Russia, show varying ideas of adoption. Each Internet source reflects people's perceptions of adoption, orphaned children and other cultures. I use these Internet websites and blogs as a source in understanding how adoption is being represented and reformed in Russia and the U.S. The websites present information, and experiences, for prospective parents and advocates. They show how adoption is being defined in light of government changes and media representations.

1.4.4 Interviews

Some informal interviews and phone conversations were conducted with missionaries, NGO workers, orphanage staff and lawyers. The information gathered from those interviews and conversations are used as background information to analyze how the adoption system works, the current status of the adoption system between Russia and the United States, and general opinions about the system.

1.5 Chapter Breakdown

Each chapter discusses a different aspect of the Russian-American adoption relationship since the early 1990s.

Chapter two discusses how Russian children become abandoned by their mothers and parents, and also how this led to the beginning of the Russian-American adoption relationship. The reasons behind abandonment are primarily a variety of social and economic issues, such as the desire of a young mother to continue her studies or a lack of family connection. As Russians were experiencing rapid social change due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many foreigners, notably Americans, were entering the newly independent nation in order to lend a helping hand, so to speak, to help Russians in their "struggle." Child abandonment in Russia became a topic that American adoption agencies began to advertise, to promote American adoption of Russian children. The emotional bond American parents felt for orphaned Russian children pictured in brochures sparked a very popular adoption program in the 1990s. This chapter presents how a "first world", "receiving" nation, grasped some control over Russian social workers by operating under the assumption that Russia was like a "third world" nation. Adoption was one way to help Russian orphaned children and "struggling" Russian society.

Chapter three discusses the American perception of Russian orphaned children. This perception was influenced by the report of orphanages by Human Rights Watch, and the publication of photographs of "suffering" children. After the Russian-American adoption relationship had been working for several years, reports of murders in the United States started to be reported. These events sparked the downfall of this adoption relationship, and negatively affected the relationship between Russians and Americans for adoption, but also for general state-relations. These events show how the visual representation of the children in photographs convinced American parents and society

that adoption was an “answer” to end suffering. This discussion also presents the idea that adopted children carry their past with them, and that the murders are reflective of this ignorance of the American parents. Reports in American media strongly reflected the way American society has viewed Russian orphans; as suffering children living in institutions. The murders in these reports were not the fault of the parents, but of the society where the children came from, Russia.

Chapter four goes into the Russian media and government responses to the adoption murders in the United States. As Russian reports of the murders became more common, a government ban on American adoptions came into effect. This chapter explores the significance of the adoption moratorium against Americans, and how the ban was reflective of a national rejection of American influence in Russia. One of the most important aspects of the ban was the creation of a Russian government website promoting domestic adoption. While the ban on foreign adoption temporarily shut down the Russian-American adoption relationship, American parents began searching for “suffering” children in other countries. This chapter concludes with the state of Russian-American adoption relationship today. The changes taking place in this relationship are not final, they are ongoing. What has been described in this thesis until now shows a larger change in the way Americans and Russians relate to each other. Adoption has been a facet of this larger relationship.

The concluding remarks in the final chapter discusses the future of the Russian-American adoption relationship. I also question the future of how both societies perceive orphaned children since so much media attention has surrounded them. While I have positive expectations for Russian domestic adoptions, I have a negative outlook for

Americans adopting Russian children. I discuss that even though the adoption of white children may continue to be desired, many parents will begin adopting from other, more popular, countries. What this chapter summarizes is that adoption practices are reflective of social and political relationships. This is not only indicative of the Russian-American relationship, but of all intercountry adoption relationships.

Chapter 2

Orphaned Children in Russia and American Perceptions Thereof

“Disintegration of the family was widely perceived as a social and moral evil, a sign of the disorder of the times; consolidation of the family was interpreted as a move toward normalcy” (Fitzpatrick 2000:143).

2.1 Introduction

How children become orphaned in Russia and the economic, social and cultural factors that lead to child abandonment are topics that affect American perceptions of adoptions from Russia. The motives for abandonment do not remain within a society as insular knowledge, they become information used internationally by adoption agencies when informing parents of why and how child relinquishment occurs. The images of and information about children suffering in the midst of upheaval has a purpose: they are used to market adoption for prospective parents. Issues such as alcoholism, single-parenthood, and economic difficulties are just some of the topics that the American media have drawn attention to in their reports of child abandonment.

Catherine Panter-Brick states that to view abandonment as a social construct is “to recognize that it [abandonment] tends to be used in too stereotyped a fashion because one particular view of a ‘proper’ childhood tends to prevail” (2000:4). Panter-Brick continues stating that according to the American view of a ‘proper’ childhood, “a child should have a ‘carefree, safe, secure and happy’ [Sommerville 1982] existence and be raised by ‘caring and responsible adults’” (2000:4). Only in this setting can a child become a fully developed individual. These ideas inform Americans’ adoption plans, and holding the promise that their new child will fit in as an American child because he or she will be able to thrive in this environment. But, this point of view also looks down

upon the way orphaned children develop in Russia, as they are seen to be living in environments that prevent life in a 'safe and happy' home. From this perspective a child is indeed being saved by being adopted. At the same time, the homes that are provided in Russia, orphanages do not exist as such in the United States. There is a lack of knowledge about them and they are regarded as antiquated institutions.

Factors like alcoholism have become fuel for enduring stereotypes in "receiving" countries like the United States, which perpetuates many perceptions that people have toward a "donor" culture. Xavier Andrade writes that stereotypes "express a perverted use of the concept of culture, inasmuch as they deny its internal diversity, negate its dynamic and contradictory nature, and freeze its historically situated contents" (2002:236). In the context of this research, the existence of stereotypes about Russians in the adoption system is based on American perceptions of life in Russia after the Soviet Union. For example, Lisa Cartwright (2003, 2005) writes that many people in the 1990s became interested in Russian adoptions not only because of white children, but also as a way to protect the child since alcoholism became a "cultural attribute among some populations." (2003:85). When stereotypes play a part in the adoption decision-making process, it can become problematic in terms of the way people view the "other" and how those perceptions affect adoption practices. Stereotypes act as persuasions for foreign adoptive parents to take action and adopt. The Russian-American adoption relationship has grown quickly and vastly because of it. While some reasons for abandonment are indeed linked to issues like alcoholism, there are many *other* factors that have led the increase in the number of orphaned children in Russia.

How do children become orphans? Or, to be more specific, how do Russian children become orphans? Child abandonment is a social and cultural phenomenon that occurs under different circumstances around the world. As Clifford Geertz stated, "once human behavior is seen as symbolic action ... the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together loses sense ... the thing to ask is what their import is" (1973:10). In this section, one of my aims is to show that child abandonment is a significant cultural and social factor in Russia. Clementine Creuziger writes that children, "once hailed under the Soviet regime as the future of modern society and the responsibility of all adults, thousands... have since been labeled as unwanted beggars" (1997:343). This statement appropriately begins the presentation on how children have become abandoned in Russia since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Keeping Creuziger's statement in mind, I will show how, since the early 1990s, Russian orphans have become a central part of the global adoption culture due to the presentation of their social situation by foreign media. I will explore the cultural background of abandonment in Russia, and also will address how this topic has been used by American adoption agencies as proof that Russian orphaned children are not living a 'proper' childhood.

2.2 Factors Contributing to Becoming Orphaned in Russia

In her ethnography, *Russia's Abandoned Children: An Intimate Understanding* (2005), Fujimura³ et al., writes, "to many Russians whom I interviewed, orphans are similar to the average Russian in that they suffer. They are extreme victims, but mirrors nonetheless of the experiences of the peoples of Russia" (2005:7). A similar sentiment can be found in Nancy Ries' *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (1997), as she asks, "Why is Russian experience so full of suffering and misfortune?" (1997:5). This insight that orphans do suffer, according to Fujimura's informants, shows a public acknowledgement of their situation. In the work by Fujimura et al. (2005), as well as that of Olga Issoupova (2000) and Jamila Bargach (2002), orphans' 'bad blood,' mostly due to the "uncertainty of their origins" (Bargach 2002). Bargach's ethnography offers valuable cross-cultural comparisons, as her research on adoption and abandonment in Morocco informs us that the notion of 'bad blood' can be associated with abandonment and orphan-hood as an anthropological topic of inquiry. The concept of 'bad blood' is not transmitted through the transaction of intercountry adoption, meaning that foreign parents do not subscribe to the notion of 'bad blood'. For orphans who remain un-adopted in the "donor" country, it continues to be a social and cultural factor that affects their potential adoption.

Olga Issoupova states that child abandonment in Russia can also be seen optimistically, because abortion has been avoided and "at least in this case the child is still alive, so there is the possibility, though small, that something good can happen to him or her" (2000:97). For her article, "Problematic Motherhood: Child Abandonment, Abortion, Adoption and Single Motherhood in Russia in the 1990s," Issoupova

³ Clementine Creuziger uses the surname Fujimura in her later works.

interviewed several young women during 1995-1997 about their experiences and perceptions of abortion, adoption and abandonment. The aim of her research was to explore “attitudes of Russian women to motherhood” (2000:80). Her interviews explore some of the “worst situations” of motherhood experiences, but also shed some light on how women in post-Soviet Russia view children, themselves as mothers and wives, and their future. Her research reveals that some of the most important causes of child abandonment for young women include male partner problems, economic issues (unemployment), personal growth (desire to study), social issues (lack of social connections), legal, psychological and health-related problems (2000:93-94). When these issues lead to abandonment, children are often sent to an orphanage or sometimes to other family members (Issoupova 2000, Fujimura et al. 2005). If the mother decides that she cannot provide for a child while she is pregnant, she would be encouraged to have an abortion, an action that was seen to be more socially and morally acceptable than abandonment. Issoupova writes that once a woman has given birth, she then has the right to “relinquish parental rights over her newborn child while she is in the maternity hospital” (2000:82). From here, the mother signs the required paperwork and thereafter has no connection to the child, who will either go into an institution or become adopted.

Elena Khlinovskaya-Rockhill discusses how the problem of “social orphans is tied to the perceived post-socialist crisis in the family with its falling moral standards and is seen as an indicator of the disintegration of the social fabric of society” (2004:133). Social orphans are children who have at least one legal parent, but reside in an orphanage since they cannot be cared for (Rockhill 2004). In the mid-nineties the number of social orphans increased from 6,700 to 31,790 per year (Karelova 2000), as they were

taken away from their parents by the state who viewed their family situation as “unfit” (Rockhill 2004:133). According to these connected reports by Issoupova and Rockhill, the family structure in Russia underwent serious changes in the 1990s as economic instability made it difficult for mothers, especially single mothers, to care for children if they were not employed or supported by family. Rockhill informs us that not only has the family structure suffered during this time, but the representation of childhood in Russia shifted greatly from “‘our only privileged class’ and ‘our future’ to the emergence of numerous groups of ‘children at risk’ growing up in conditions of severe deprivation” (2004:132-133). In some cases, this situation led to an increase in homeless, or street, children. Creuziger writes that some children prefer to live on the street since it provides a sense of independence, and provides a break from a “traditional family life” (1997:5).

Domestic adoptions have occurred in Russia during the 1990s and before, but there is little anthropological description as to the experience. The magazine *Russian Life* provided an article about perceptions of Russian adoption in 1998, and provided an American perspective into domestic adoptions in Russia. Writer Colin Cummings interviewed a U.S. Embassy spokeswoman who said that, “Russians ... don’t speak openly about their plans to adopt. They don’t announce the fact that a child was adopted. And so a family considering adoption doesn’t have that kind of automatic support, that community of adoptive parents” (1998:16). This gives insight into how different adoption is perceived in Russia, as opposed to the U.S., where there are many communities of parents supporting each other and their new children. This is a distinct cultural difference in the perception of adoption in these two societies.

Issoupova writes that adoption had become easier in the 1990s, but it is unclear to what kind of adoption she is referring. Her article describes how some young Russian women perceived adoption. For example, a woman named Alla is quoted as saying, “Let them go to hell, other people’s children! Better to have one’s own” (2000:91). Alla’s view toward orphans is negative, and shows how the concept of ‘bad blood’ affects her perspective of orphaned children. Fujimura and her collaborators write that,

The disdain for orphans in public areas is one reason for orphans’ lack of success in society. The disdain is, however, so deep rooted that there is little hope for change in the near future. The disdain is accompanied by low expectations, discrimination, and alienation, all part of a larger understanding of orphans as genetically deficient, as having bad blood [2005:18-19].

According to Fujimura’s research, the general idea behind ‘bad blood’ is that an orphan cannot be much different from his or her parents because, as was expressed by an orphanage caretaker, “How can the child be different? She has their blood” (Fujimura et al. 2005:17). These beliefs explain why the practice of adoption in Russia has been unpopular and stigmatizing. Though adoptions have occurred in Russia, Fujimura described instances in which couples chose to relocate so that nobody knew that new family member was adopted (Fujimura et al. 2005). To adopt an orphan would also mean adopting the blood of their parents (Fujimura et al. 2005:17). As news of an adopted child becomes known in a community, the “public secret” (Taussig 1999) of an orphaned child’s past leads to stigmatization of not just the child, but the whole

household. For all these reasons, many children are kept within the confines of the institution. When a child becomes institutionalized, childhood has ended, according to American perspectives (Hecht 1998). Panter-Brick writes that, "The responsibility for providing a suitable upbringing is placed unequivocally on the adults who relate to a particular child and, where this fails, on society" (2000:4). This point was expressed by Americans who perceived child abandonment and orphanages as a failure of Russian society.

American advocates exposed these deeply rooted cultural notions of 'bad blood' after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The increasing number of children entering orphanages and living on the streets became symbols to outsiders of the socio-cultural changes that Russia was experiencing and the complexities of adapting to a new state regime. Outsiders who were documenting life in orphanages for American audiences delivered images that were positively influential for Americans who would become adoptive parents. But, the images were also negatively influential for the stereotypes and criticisms that Russians would receive by Americans through the adoption of orphaned children.

2.3 "Obsessional Love" - The Human Rights Watch Report

2.3.1 Responses to the Image of Russian Orphaned Children

Russia's position on the list of 'donor' countries began with the "shredding of the Iron Curtain...hundreds of thousands of Eastern European children, perhaps millions, were being warehoused in dilapidated institutions because their parents were too poor, too alcohol-dependent, and/or too emotionally impaired to care for them" (Pertman 2000:55). Particular attention was spent on the welfare of orphans by organizations like Human Rights Watch (HRW), in which a published report entitled "Abandoned to the State: Cruelty and Neglect in Russian Orphanages" (1998), detailing everyday life in an orphanage, from social attitudes toward the children to state policies on the daily operations of the institution. A similar HRW report, focusing on China's orphanages, was published with the title "Death by Default: A Policy of Fatal Neglect in China's State Orphanages" (1996). Both reports sent waves of distress to outsiders who were able to get a first look into the condition of life in state-run orphanages. Lisa Cartwright writes that "visual mediation" (2005:186) of the life of orphans abroad,

Facilitated by advances in global news media, computer and digital imaging, and image reproduction technologies, played a major role in the emergence of a global social movement dedicated to the care of the social orphan as a transnational entity of riveting concern in the 1990s [2005:186-7].

Cartwright's statement that the social orphan became a "transnational entity" indicates a transition for orphaned children, as if they are in a liminal stage and no longer belong to a specific nationality, but instead become members of the intercountry adoption community by being listed as children waiting to be adopted.

The organization Human Rights Watch, which is based in the United States and in urban centers around the world, has published numerous reports on the abuse, neglect and violence of people around the world. On their website, it is stated that “HRW believes that international standards of human rights apply to all people equally, and that sharp vigilance and timely protest can prevent the tragedies of the twentieth century from recurring.” Furthermore, the publicity gained by their published reports “help embarrass abusive governments in the eyes of their citizens and the world” (HRW 1998). Their report on the conditions of orphanage life in Russia gave Americans an example of what Boltanski calls “distant suffering” (1999). From newspapers to television documentaries, orphanage life was depicted with dark, dismal imagery during the 1990s. Lisa Cartwright analyzes the ways in which reports like HRW’s affected audiences by documenting children’s lives in states undergoing drastic changes. She writes that the

Images invoked horror and consternation in viewers, but they also invoked concern and even obsessional love. Revulsion toward the inhumane circumstances and suffering depicted in the program provoked a rescue response driven by the desire to save the social orphan; the children imaged in the broadcast became the object of an obsessional fantasy [2005:192-3].

It should be stated here that this ‘obsession’ to ‘save’ the social orphan is specifically save the *foreign* social orphan. The media’s and HRW’s coverage of institutional life resulted in large humanitarian aid which included the building of adoption programs.

Reports, photographs and video documentaries “provoked a rescue response” (Cartwright 2005:193) on the part of Americans for orphans in Russia and other popular adoption destinations like China, but for each country, different circumstances of regime change or state policies led to a predominantly American, reaction of “obsessional love” (Cartwright 2005:192-3).

Arjun Appadurai writes that media “create specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation. Neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national or regional spaces” (1996:3-4). Since visual images of orphans are readily available on the Internet and in documentaries, the distance between potential parents and adoptees becomes very small. Lisa Cartwright states, that, “detailed visual documentation was a major source of fodder for the seemingly crystal-clear public vision on the spectacle of child suffering” (2005:191). Due to advances in technology, actions taken by the West, either through donations, advocacy or adoption, became quicker and more frequent, thus pushing the advertising of intercountry adoption further into a business. The distance between adoptive parent and orphaned child became shorter, making “distant suffering” less of an obstacle for action.

The imagery of suffering that was presented struck not only an emotional chord with Americans, but informed people of the situation of abandoned children abroad. As these images began to be circulated, the American perception of orphaned children changed. As adoption became more of a common practice by American couples, the images associated with orphans no longer possessed shock value. Instead, ‘positive’ photographs of smiling, healthy children were utilized to help encourage potential

parents to adopt. Cartwright explains that, “these images functioned initially as lures, drawing prospective clients into the adoption market, helping them to imagine ‘their’ child or themselves as parents of children ‘like these’” (2003:83). The child began to be viewed “as an innocent in need of protection and a dependent in need of guidance” (Holland 1992; Ennew 1995; Panter-Brick 2000). Once these kinds of images became readily available for American audiences, people were able to see Russian orphans as *children*. This is an important distinction to be made. In the HRW report, the images of suffering children were depicted in such a way that they emphasized for Americans that an orphan looks malnourished, institutionalized and unhappy. Creuziger touches on this, saying that “it is an ironic self-fulfilling prophecy that the institutionalized children are predisposed to a bad future because of ... the character that is developed in the orphanage. One such trait is their collective behavior” (1997:350). She also explains that during the time of her research, caretakers preferred to help children become individuals, but despite this, it is the idea of the orphanage as a collective that has become a stereotype that Americans have of Russian orphaned children. Upon a child’s adoption, his or her individual character would be developed and encouraged by the adoptive parents.

In this context, the significance of visual images is that they act as evidence for Americans that Russian children *need* and *want* to be adopted. The photograph becomes the medium through which parents make emotional connections to the child they are looking at, the “lure” of which Cartwright speaks. Cartwright explains that photographs become information for the parents wishing to adopt a certain child. Like an ultrasound, the photograph is reviewed for the health, gender and the assurance that everything

looks “normal” in the child (2003:84). These images also allow adoptive parents to make a connection to a child that they begin to believe, or know, is going to be theirs. There is a sense of ownership that ‘their’ child is waiting for them.

“Abandoned to the State” was an important report for many reasons: it gave Americans knowledge about Russian orphans, orphanages and how Russians see them. The report also exemplified for Americans the “spectacle of suffering”. When children were being viewed as the object of suffering, their images came to be seen as an embodiment of a lost, and un-proper, childhood (Hecht 1998). The “spectacle of suffering” became a cause. Boltanski writes that,

The fact remains that viewing suffering is especially problematic when the object of suffering is presumed to be real, as in the case of certain reports or televised current events for example, and it is all the more problematic the further away the unfortunate is and the more the possibilities of action open to the spectator are, as a result, uncertain [1999:23].

The reality, as Boltanski mentions, behind images of suffering presents another concern that is significant for the way adoption is presented to parents. Once adoption programs with Russia and other nations started to increase in the 1990s and after, it seems that the importance of the HRW report waned. Even though parents interested in adoption today do not actively seek the report, it does remain a significant, albeit dated, document. In the Internet blog “The Accidental Russophile”, the writer states that the HRW report is “scathing”, and acknowledges its dated material. He does write that the

report is something sought after by Americans, and that it “encourages families to adopt a Russian child” (2006). The report presented reason for a cause, but at the same time, it seems the importance of this cause to help the foreign orphan has become manipulated into the business of intercountry adoption.

While Russian orphans are being chosen for adoption by foreign parents, the U.S. Embassy spokeswoman interviewed by Cummings states that, “Russians have trouble understanding why Americans would want to adopt children with serious physical or mental illnesses” (1998:16). In the 1990s, this was something Americans did not yet see in Russian orphaned children. Cummings interviewed a Christian missionary leader who said that he discourages Americans from adopting Russians, because the healthiest children get adopted, while the ones with problems are left in the orphanages. The missionary said that he sees Americans “shopping for a child as if they were going into Walmart looking for an item of clothing” (1998:12). Instead of this kind of consumer-driven adoption practice, the missionary suggests focusing on helping the entire orphanage.

The image of Russian orphaned children has strongly affected the American perception of them. Americans relied on images as a source of information, to learn more about how children are living in orphanages. For Russians, these images were not playing an active part in a perception of orphaned children. The images were taken for Americans to see. As HRW stated, one of their goals as an agency is to “embarrass” governments about problems in their society. The images of Russian orphaned children did just that, but it also started a growing trend of American adoptions. In the next section, I will show how these images affected American perceptions of Russian

children, and how the act of adoption continued to “embarrass” Russians and their government.

2.4 My American Perception of a Russian Orphanage

It seems that a balanced representation of orphanage life is missing from the academic literature and agency reports. Much of the published research concerns life in urban, or “bad” orphanages, and it nourishes the American idea that all orphanages fit into the mold of a dark, dilapidated building in which many children of poor nourishment live. My very short experiences at a small, rural orphanage in Khabrovskii Krai, makes me think that not all orphanage experiences match what HRW reported. However, I cannot ignore the fact that before my visit to Russia, I had anticipated seeing orphanages like the ones I had seen in the HRW report photographs. Even though I was not familiar with the way adoption is advertised to Americans before my visit to Russia, I did have an image of what I thought Russian orphanages were like. These thoughts corresponded with the images in the HRW report and other resources, like the work of Clementine Fujimura.

Being granted a visit to an orphanage and to spend any amount of time in one as an “outsider” can only be done through making the right contacts and establishing a sense of trust and honesty between oneself and the orphanage staff allowing one to visit. For my visit to an orphanage, I made contacts with American missionaries in Khabarovsk months in advance, with constant communication through e-mail, informing them of the purpose of my visit. Even when I arrived in Khabarovsk, I met with them for dinner or other informal meetings several times before going to the

orphanage. The HRW report goes into the difficulties of entering an orphanage as an outsider, and how many Russian staff workers had to be cautious about what they discussed with the fear of being fired for saying too much about life in the orphanage. I was able to talk with the orphanage director casually and briefly. A very young woman, she was open to talk about her job in the orphanage. I presume she was somewhat comfortable talking to me, but only because the missionaries, her personal friends, had approved of my visit.

I had anticipated seeing orphanages like the ones pictured and described in the reports I had read. The date of the report was not an issue at the time I was reading it in 2005 and 2006. In my mind, I assumed things had not changed since the mid 1990s. Being an American myself, I found myself prone to the perceptions and stereotypes that all orphanages are representative of the ones visited by HRW workers and Creuziger/Fujimura.

My first visit to an orphanage was on a very sunny, hot summer day. The missionaries had picked me up at my downtown hotel in Khabarovsk, and we drove one hour outside the city into a rural village called Karsakova. We passed old schools, *dachas*, and garden plots, with the Amur River in our view. We eventually pulled into a small driveway adjacent to a one-story building with bright yellow walls and colorful details around the frames of it. There were many trees and other similar looking buildings nearby. This was the village orphanage, a very friendly looking building based on its outside appearance. One of the missionaries was enthusiastically showing me around the building, showing me what projects the children were involved in, such as a garden and small park. I was informed that since I was staying the summer, it was a

bad time to visit the orphanage since most of the children were at summer camp. I learned that the children stay at the camp for most of the summer, and then return to the orphanage in early fall when the school year commences.

Inside the orphanage, I was greeted by some of the staff who stayed to watch after the children who decided not to go to the summer camp. My presence did not seem to disturb them. I was then taken on a tour of the building itself. It was very clean and bright inside. Each room was painted a bright color, or had wallpaper. I was first shown the dining room, which looked more like a small café and the kitchen that the cooking took place in. All of the dishes were very neatly placed and I learned that when the children eat, they eat at very specific times of the day and have to eat in sections since the dining room is small. I started to wonder what the daily schedule was like for children, and what the interactions in this room, and the rest of the building, must be like when everyone is living here. Beyond the kitchen, we moved into the next room, which was a large living room, with couches, books, and a television. There I met a young girl who smiled and introduced herself to me. She was watching a television show and was cheerful upon seeing the missionaries. Connected to this room was one of the bedrooms that housed several bunk beds. Here too, I met two teenage girls who were also first to greet me and say hello. I was shown an exercise room, computer room and an office for the staff psychologist. Toward the end of the tour, I met some of the boys, who were busy playing a video game. The boys were very friendly and I learned that most of them were related to each other, and in fact many of the children in this orphanage were siblings.

The missionaries informed me that it is very difficult emotionally to work in an orphanage, but that work is very rewarding. They have been very active in helping children who graduate from the orphanage and need help with university work or finding an apartment. They have acted like family for many of the children, and find themselves to be very close with them. From this first day at the orphanage I could sense that people do get along very well, but have been informed that not all days are cooperative. I had a very positive first visit with the orphanage, which was very enlightening to me since I was not expecting this kind of experience. I told one of the missionaries about what I was expecting to see, based on what I had read before coming to Russia. I was embarrassed telling her of what I had envisioned, but she told me she thought the same thing before she arrived in Russia. She did inform me that there are orphanages that fit the HRW description, but not all orphanages fall under that type.

This was the only experience I had in an orphanage in Russia. I had other visits with children outside the orphanage, but this was the sole visit to a Russian institution. After some reflection I realized that I was a victim of the American stereotype that all orphanages are dark places.

Americans typically associate negative connotations with the word 'orphanage', because they are not personally familiar with orphanages. There are none in the United States, only foster homes. After my visit in Russia, it was difficult to associate any kind of negative connotations with the orphanage in Karsakova. On the basis of my one visit I would not content that all orphanages have been depicted wrongly. I began to think that large, urban orphanages were the ones active in the American perception. The large upswing in Russian adoptions in the United States added to the American image of

Russian orphanages “bad” in many ways. I left the village orphanage in Karsakova with an entirely different perception.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how an American perception of Russian orphaned children was created by visual representation. The images provided to Americans to learn either about Russian children, or the adoption program, combined with a larger understanding of life in post-Soviet Russia. Visual representations turned into a visual understanding, as Americans began to believe that what they saw is what was real. Even though these images helped promote Russian adoptions, they also promoted an American perception that Russians were living in a “third world”, and that children were suffering in this state. Russian adoptions quickly became a humanitarian gesture, as some parents believed they were saving children from orphanages. As adoption agencies began using different, positive, images of orphaned children for adoption brochures, the idea of saving children through adoption waned, as the desire of having white children became more dominant. The next chapter discusses how this latter concern of adopting Russian children led to a chaotic and unmonitored Russian-American adoption system.

Chapter 3

Adopted Russian Children in America

"Today, one increasingly hears that children arrive with a 'backpack' full of past experiences. Although the amount of 'baggage' in the backpack varies with each child, the implicit message of this metaphor is that the past, however brief, has consequences for the child's development in its new circumstances." (Howell 2004:229).

3.1 Introduction

A New York Times article written in 1997 described a visit made by a Russian official, Nikolai I. Shugai, of the Education Department in Primorskii Krai, to an American family based in a suburb of Seattle. Shugai wanted to see how life for the newly adopted Russian child was going. He is quoted saying that "Russian people are still interested in what the future of children is here [the United States]" (Anonymous 1997). His visit was prompted by news of problems with the adoption of Russian children by Americans, including cases of abuse and a murder.

Shugai was invited to visit the United States by the Seattle based adoption agency World Association for Children and Parents [WACAP], one of the largest accredited adoption agencies in the United States. The American journalist covering the story states that, "since Russia began allowing adoptions by foreigners in 1992, the country has become an increasingly popular source for Americans hoping to adopt. White children in need of parents are plentiful, and can be adopted rather quickly". WACAP has a "special relationship with the region [Primorskii Krai] because it is the part of Russia closest to Washington," and shows how an accredited agency has developed a trusting relationship with Russian officials and orphanages (Anonymous 1997). Not all adoption agencies have followed this example. Non-accredited agencies

have received the blame for a number of adoptions that have led to abuse scandals and murders.

In 2005, several years after Shugai's Seattle visit, Russian media sources reported two highly publicized adoption murders, those of Alex Pavlis and Nina Hilt, which led to a politicized move to end foreign adoption. American media sources reported on the two cases minimally until the threat of an adoption moratorium caused a panic for foreign prospective parents and agencies. For Russians, the 2005 reports of the murders that occurred in the United States contributed to the perception that Americans are bad parents, and that adopted orphans may have a life of violence and danger ahead of them in the United States. As the Russian government called for the placement of a moratorium on the foreign adoption of orphans, many in the Russian adoption community and general public reacted negatively toward American parents wishing to adopt.

With the moratorium and criticisms negatively affecting American parents in general, the American perceptions of adoption as an act of goodness toward orphans "suffering" in institutions led to an understanding that an adoption "crisis" was at hand. For Americans, it seemed inevitable that Russian orphans would remain without an adoptive family, presuming that the only option left for orphaned children was an American family.

The thirteen murders, which are reported to have occurred between the years 1996 to 2003⁴, are not the sole reason the Russian government decided to place a

⁴ This information was gathered from the website www.about.com. This website has a section about the Russian adoption murders, which is rather comprehensive, and lists each of the reported murders in the chronology of the years presented here. I have not found other sources that list the murders like this website.

moratorium on foreign adoptions. Political relations between the United States and Russia have grown tense over the last decade. In this atmosphere of growing political suspicion, the adoption murders marked the beginning of the end of the largely unrestricted movement of orphans from Russia to the U.S. which had characterized the 1990s.

In American Internet sources like blogs and reports of completed adoption transactions, there is a general assumption that suffering ends with adoption and that the new American child will be grateful for his or her new nationality. A child may be removed from an environment of “suffering”, as judged by “receiving” societies, but whether the child, as an individual, continues to experience suffering, emotionally or psychologically, is what cannot be easily determined, since the scars might be stowed away in what Howell calls the child’s “backpack”(2004:229).

The murder cases were given a lot of attention in the Russian media. The idea that American parents are unfit to raise a Russian child became a kind of counter weight to the negative way in which American media had portrayed orphanage life in Russia. This chapter discusses how American media coverage of the thirteen⁵ murders of adopted Russian orphans in the United States reflects the perceptions that Americans have of intercountry adoption and orphaned children.

3.2 The Adoption Murders

The murders of Alex Pavlis and Nina Hilt

⁵ There have been various sources reporting 13 or 14 murder cases. I have counted reported 13 cases, and will stay with this number. The 14th case is presumed to have taken place in Italy, although no sources for this has been identified to confirm it. I was told this by Carrie Craft, who researches intercountry adoption for the website About.com

In 2005, news reached Russia that a young boy by the name of Alex Pavlis was murdered by his adoptive parents in Illinois. He died only two months after his adoption, as his mother Irma Pavlis beat him to death. Her stated reasons for committing the murder were that he was “mentally unstable and suicidal... he would bang his head against the wall and urinated and defecated throughout the house for no apparent reason.” She admitted beating Alex “in the stomach and slapping his face.” She did not understand that his actions “were caused by fetal alcohol syndrome, a result of his birth mother’s excessive drinking during her pregnancy.” Pavlis blamed her adoption agency, an independent one, for not informing her of Alex’s health conditions (Sector 2005).

The thirteen reported murders of Russian children occurred over a ten-year time span, the first one in 1996 in Colorado, where David Polreis Jr.’s adoptive mother Renee Polreis was convicted of child abuse resulting in death. The boy was only two years old at the time. The reported murder cases following Polreis’ death had similar patterns. The adoptive mother was typically convicted of child abuse or involuntary manslaughter as a result of trying to quell the child’s tantrums. It is not known whether the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome were always the reason for the child’s tantrums, but physical, emotional and mental disabilities of some Russian orphans are an issue that American adoption agencies warn potential parents about before making final decisions. Adoption agency advocate Natasha Shaginian-Needham was interviewed in 2005 about the murder of Alex Pavlis and is quoted as saying “families are so eager for blond-haired, blue-eyed kids they don’t really listen to the [adoption] training” (Sector 2005).

In 2006, in the state of North Carolina, a two-year-old girl named Nina Hilt was murdered by her adoptive mother, Peggy Sue Hilt. The mother told the court and authorities that she “choked her... hit her and hit her.” Unlike the case of Alex Pavlis, where his biological mother consumed alcohol during pregnancy, thereby causing Alex’s behavior, Peggy Sue Hilt was herself an alcoholic and had many problems bonding with the child. The case ended with sending Hilt to serve 25 years in jail, but her sentence, along with Pavlis’, sent waves of anger and frustration for Russians and Americans involved in intercountry adoption. In Russia these stories affected a much larger audience beyond the adoption community. It angered the government and the general public that American parents would commit violent acts against Russia’s children.

Present at the Hilt trial were Russian journalists reporting the outcome of the case. At the same time in Russia, officials were planning to place a moratorium on all adoptions to the United States. When the Alex Pavlis case reached the Russian media in 2005, the idea of placing a moratorium was already in process. The Pavlis and Hilt cases were the “last straws” to break, so to speak, for the adoption relationship between Russia and the United States, because these stories were thirteen too many.

In most of the cases, it was the mother who committed the murder or accidental killing, and the causes of death were smothering, physical abuse, or malnutrition. Most of the children were under the age of five and had only been adopted for several months to a year. In 2003 when the Pavlis and Hilt cases were first being reported, the stories began to receive more attention from people in the United States, but before then, there was hardly any information about the murders available. When conducting a simple

Internet search on the murders today, a large number of American websites and news stories are found covering the stories. A trend that is evident in American news coverage of the Pavlis and Hilt cases is that they were not being covered solely because of the murders, but also because the media attention these stories were receiving in Russia.

Even though adoption agencies may have done thorough background checks on parents, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to know how potential adoptive parents will actually *be* with their new child. It would be difficult to predict how family bonding will work before the adoption even takes place. Also, some agencies could have bypassed background checks in order to complete the adoption transaction quickly, making the assumption that money was really the only goal behind connecting a child with a family. In the literature about the intercountry adoption “experience,” there is sometimes mention of corrupt “bad guys” in the “donor countries” who scam potential parents into finding a child (Pertman 2000, Larsen 2007). Very high adoption fees, fake or nonexistent paperwork, and lawyers (bar certified or non certified), all have adoptive parents and orphaned children entangled in a web of fraud, or corruption, that shrouds some adoption experiences. American media coverage tends to place an emotional emphasis on these particular cases that take place in “donor countries,” triggering sympathy for the adoptive parents and the child, while it is clear that similar adoption practices can indeed be found within the United States.

3.3 The American Response to the Murders

Unlike most Russian news sources that have used the abuse and murder stories as national headline news, coverage of the murders in American media had been limited to regional or city newspapers, with brief descriptions of the incidents. In 2005, the Pavlis and Hilt cases became more prominent national American news sources, an effect of the growing threat of a Russian adoption moratorium. Although the stories covered the details of the murders, the major concern expressed in American news was that of an adoption “crisis”, which would not be available for adoption, would prohibit interested Americans parents from adopting Russian children.

In several articles for the *Christian Science Monitor*, correspondent Fred Weir covered Russian adoption issues. In a June 2005 article, he writes that there has been a “significant slowdown in international adoptions from Russia this year, due to an ugly and very public bureaucratic war that pits government liberals and child-care agencies against nationalist politicians who allege that children are being ‘trafficked’ abroad” (Weir, CSM, 06/23/2005). His coverage of the abuse cases presents contemporary Russian perspectives of the issues, as seen by American adoption advocates. Other American news articles presented the cases with the implication that parents should be aware of these events and that there have been consequences from the murders for the entire adoption program with Russia. These fears are purely American perspectives toward the changes in the adoption program with Russia. In most of the media coverage, there is hardly any discussion about the cases themselves, why they happened and what can be learned from them. Weir demonstrates this, as the information provided in his article discusses a political and bureaucratic “crisis,” rather than a

“crisis” of how people perceive Russian orphaned children and their chance to have a family.

Weir continues that “the spate of child-abuse allegations against foreigners appears a timely validation of claims by a group of State Duma deputies that Russia’s adoption process, overseen by the Ministry of Education, is riddled with corruption and incompetence, leading to the virtual sale of Russian children”, and that lawmakers are viewing this practice as “trafficking” children. (Weir 2005)⁶. As a response to this, he writes that American child-care professionals say that, “Russia’s orphans are being used as a political football by nationalist politicians” (Weir 2005). The current adoption discourse between Russians and Americans is riddled with politics.

From Weir’s article we know little about how adoption agencies may or may not be changing their own policies to make adoptions a more secure process for parents and children. There are no indications that improvements in the adoption system may be anticipated for the future. But what we do learn from his article is how political ties between Russia and the United States are worsening, and that there is an amount of blame that each state is placing on each other for the problems in the adoption system.

As the threat of an adoption moratorium became more of a reality for American adoption advocates, the major concern expressed by American journalists was geared toward the policies of the Russian government and the future of orphaned children. In 2007, adoption stories began to change. Journalists continued to cover Russian politics on adoption and what agencies were trying to do to help adopting parents, but stories

⁶ It is unknown if these quotations are the result of direct interviews or from other articles.

re-evaluating the adoption system, the experiences of orphaned children and for the adoptive parents, began to emerge.

In a National Public Radio (NPR) story broadcast in April of 2007, we hear about the politics surrounding adoption, but also about the conditions of life for orphaned children who remain in institutions. The reporter, Gregory Feifer, is heard saying, "Children's rights advocates say the official crackdown on foreign adoptions is more about national pride than concern for child welfare. They say it condemns children to a system of Soviet-era institutions desperately in need of reform" (NPR 2007). The story continues with sounds of crying babies and interviews with orphanage volunteers talking about their experiences. The broadcast is very similar to the 1996 Human Rights Watch report, for its sentiments of "pity politics" and focus on "suffering" children. The timing of the report and this broadcast is interesting to point out. The HRW report was released at a time when Russian adoptions were new, but rapidly growing in popularity. The information then presented a sort of "shock value" for American audiences about institutional life, images that have remained with the American perception of orphanages and orphans. In 2007, the radio broadcast was released at a time when adoptions from Russia were dwindling in numbers due to major difficulties and mere impossibilities of adopting. The radio report seems to act as a subtle reminder for the West about Russian orphans and their experiences in institutions. But most importantly, it reminds audiences that despite politics, there are children involved, and they are affected by the prospects of adoption.

After the NPR broadcast, two similar feature articles were published in the magazines *Mother Jones* and *Newsweek*, discussing the problems of intercountry

adoption. The articles do not present solutions to adoption problems. Instead they examine how certain emotional and health problems of orphaned children can be treated by adoptive parents, and how to be better prepared for the “journey” of adoption. The content of these articles are striking for their difference. They do not discuss politics or the adoption “crisis”. Instead, the writers provide reflections of their personal adoption experience, and posit a different scenario if their adoption decisions had taken them on a different path.

In a personally revealing article titled “Did I Steal My Daughter? The Tribulations of Global Adoption” (Larsen 2007), journalist Elizabeth Larsen talks about her adoption experiences from Guatemala. Larsen’s article gives an insightful look into the reasons she and her family wanted to adopt and her perspectives on the child’s origin and future in the United States. The article goes from gaining knowledge about the adoption process to how the child settles into her new American family and home. But perhaps the most significant aspects are the perspectives that Larsen had of intercountry adoption before and after the adoption of her daughter, Flora, as she reflects:

Many adoptive parents describe their connection with their children as something that was destined by a larger force. ‘God brought us to each other’, they’ll say. ‘We were meant to be a family.’ I understand why we want to think that, but the reality is, Flora [Larsen’s adopted daughter] is my child because something went wrong. To believe otherwise would mean that God intended for Beatriz [Flora’s biological mother] to suffer

because she couldn't afford to raise her child, that we were meant to have the option of adding a girl to our family because we could afford the price [Larsen 2007].

What Larsen's article presents is not just one woman's experience adopting from Guatemala, but how intercountry adoption is a process that connects people and the many experiences that they go through when it comes to caring for an orphaned or abandoned child. Larsen talks about why she and her family decided to adopt from Guatemala, as if the options presented to her were like "menu items," deciding between a "closed" or "open" adoption, the specific origin of the child, a non-institutionalized child, and the country of origin "to be easy to travel to, so we [the Larsens] could go there for family vacations" (Larsen 2007). She also says that "moral questions" were important, but very difficult, as they had to think about raising a "Latina child in a white family" (Larsen 2007). Despite the potential difficulties, they continued with their adoption of Flora. Larsen recognizes that child abandonment in "donor" countries is an issue that is very real, and that adoption stigmas in the "donor" country are reasons why intercountry adoption becomes a possibility for orphaned children and foreign parents. As adoption is not a stigmatized practice in the United States, Larsen provides a message to her readers and fellow adoptive parents to not forget the origins of their child and how he or she became orphaned. She urges parents to at least be aware of the economic and social issues that lead to child abandonment by mothers and parents. All too often American parents are focused on the future of the child, as adoptions are "measured entirely by what she [Flora and other adoptees] gains - Montessori schools, soccer camps, piano lessons, college," but Larsen continues that this was not always first

priority for her, since “to gain a family, my daughter had to lose a family. To become an American child, she had to stop being a Guatemalan child” (Larsen 2007).

Around the time of Larsen’s article, a reminder of how some adoptions “go wrong” was published in an article in the magazine Newsweek by writer Pat Wingert. In this article titled, “When Adoptions Go Wrong,” Wingert interviews Peggy Sue Hilt, the mother of Nina Hilt. Peggy Hilt recalls going into a depression after years of struggling to connect with Nina, who “destroyed the family’s furniture and possessions” (Wingert 2007). As Nina’s behavior continued, Peggy could no longer handle the situation. She says, “I snapped. I felt this uncontrollable rage,” and then began hitting and punching Nina until she died. Wingert continues,

Hilt’s story is awful – and rare – but sadly it is not unique. ... Cases like those are extreme, but clinicians who specialize in treating foreign orphans say they are seeing more parents who are overwhelmed by their adopted children’s unexpected emotional and behavioral problems. And though reputable agencies try to warn parents of the risks, not all succeed [Wingert 2007].

Since the Hilt and Pavlis cases have received much attention by both American and Russian media, more educational initiatives to “give parents a more realistic message” have been created (Wingert 2007). Wingert provides surprising evidence that some adopted children have been sent to the American foster care system, writing that “81 children adopted overseas were relinquished to officials in 14 states in 2007.” Some cases of adoption are more extreme than others, yet we do not know much about how families

have dealt with these issues and what the adoption community has been doing to understand why these incidents occur. Unfortunately, the death of some children has been the result of not knowing how to care for a child with health problems related to institutionalization. Because not much has been known about these issues, some adopted children have even been returned to the country of origin, given to foster homes, or, at the worst, abused and murdered.

Wingert goes on to point out that even though agencies do thorough background checks and home-studies of the parents, some orphanages or agencies in the “donor” countries, “mislead prospective parents or fail to disclose the full extent of a child’s problems or personal history” (Wingert 2007). This happened to Peggy Hilt and her husband when they were adopting their second child from Russia. They had already adopted a girl from Ukraine and decided to adopt again from Russia, this time a sister pair. Once the Hilts arrived in Irkutsk they were told that the sisters were no longer available, and instead had a choice of Tatiana, “a lively 18-month-old,” or Nina, “a quiet, withdrawn 9-month old” (Wingert 2007). The Hilts signed paperwork for both girls, and when they returned to the orphanage to pick up their new daughters, they were told that Tatiana was no longer available for adoption. Hilt says that she “didn’t feel right” about the situation, but decided to adopt Nina anyway, saying “we figured we could love any child. You convince yourself that everything will turn out OK” (Wingert 2007). Once Nina started showing signs of psychological and health problems in the United States, Hilt states that, “I began to realize that we had made such a big mistake” (Wingert 2007). In contacting the orphanage in Irkutsk about the Hilt case, the doctor “did not directly answer Hilt’s charges, but insisted the child ‘was absolutely healthy

and beautiful” (Wingert 2007). The article concludes with Hilt saying, “If I knew then what I know now, I would have gotten help for Nina and for me.” Wingert says that Hilt hopes her story can help other adoptive parents going through a similar situation to seek help before something tragic happens (Wingert 2007).

This article is significant because it presents awareness, that some parents should be cautious of adopting previously institutionalized children. Wingert lists some of the signs, which include sexual acting out, aggressive bullying, sleep problems and resistance to any expression of affection (Wingert 2007). Not all adoption experiences are the same, but for those that show signs of being problematic, there are now clinics and centers where parents with adopted children can go if there are issues. The psychological and emotional effects of living in an institution have become more known to doctors, psychologists, sociologists, adoption advocates and parents. Lisa Cartwright also discusses the emergence of “adoption medicine”, a field that grew after so many children had been adopted by American families (2003:94).

American media attention has brought the issues that have surfaced with Russian adoptions to a public that has felt pity toward Russian orphans. Health concerns among Russian adoptees, like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, began to receive attention in the United States, a topic that not only agencies, parents and doctors became aware of, but the American public as well. The media coverage of the Hilt and Pavlis cases gave the American public some insight of how Russian children can possibly act out and present a danger. This coverage made parents increasingly disinterested in Russian children because of potential health difficulties. The American perception of Russian orphans quickly went from feeling pity, to indifference. Lisa Cartwright states that stories like

Hilt's symbolize a rejection of the "rescue response", the same response that began a surge of Russian adoptions in the 1990s (2005:202). The fact that white children in Russia are available for adoption does not seem to be of much importance anymore, as parents are becoming increasingly interested in programs providing healthy children, who can be adopted rather quickly without any government intervention. These are the very same reasons why Russia was a very popular adoption program to begin with (Cummings, 1998). Russian children who started to be viewed by Americans as being problematic, represent the "unsalvageable child, the child who cannot return the gift of love bestowed on her [or him] because she/he has not developed the ego required to see herself as worthy of life much less love" (Cartwright 2005:204).

For this, Americans became weary of the prospect of adopting Russian children, with the fear, and now knowledge, that they do not understand what love is. This was the case of a family Cartwright presents in her research. She states that the family adopted a young girl from Russia, and when she displayed no sign of affection, and tried to kill the family dog, they returned her to her orphanage in Russia. The parents expressed no remorse for their actions, but instead felt safer for having parted ways with their former adopted daughter. Cartwright describes their story as a rejection of the politics of pity. Instead, she writes that their story is now a "politics of consternation, reacting against the use of the image as lure, and against the rhetoric of borderlessness charity that had compelled them to draw the sufferer into their hearts" (2005:206). The obsessional love that they, and other parents, felt during their adoption procedure was "cured" by the unraveling of the child's backpack (Cartwright 2005, Howell 2004). The problem that this story portrays is the false perception that many Americans have of

adoption. American adoptions typically begin with a sense of urgency of saving a child in trouble – who is expected to respond with unconditional love.

What the NPR broadcast, Mother Jones and Newsweek articles signify are changes in the American perception of Russian adoption, but also intercountry adoption in general. These sources have been specifically highlighted because they show a major difference in how the media went from reporting the politics of the adoption moratorium, to reflections on America's adoption past. It is not clear exactly what triggered the appearance of articles on personal adoption experiences, but it seems that the way in which "pity politics" has been influential in the American perception of "those who suffer" became reevaluated. The Hilt and Pavlis murder stories seemed to initiate a need for attention to detail. It was stated earlier that some parents were so eager for the prospect of adopting white children, that parents did not pay much attention to the adoption orientation. The perception that white children were waiting to be adopted quickly changed to the perception that there is something wrong with Russian children who live in orphanages. Even though the Russian cultural notion that orphaned children possess "bad blood" does not exist in intercountry adoption discourse, it would seem that a similar notion, that Russian children are somehow "damaged" has been conjured up in American perception of Russian adoptions.

3.4 The Adoptee's "Backpack"

The "baggage" that should not be stowed away.

In the adoption process, it can be easily assumed that both adopted children and adoptive parents go through significant cultural and social changes, as they have to

adjust to a different way of life with each other and with their new home environment. For the adoption experiences of children, not much is known anthropologically about their thoughts and feelings on the process, but one could imagine the mixed emotions that are involved in leaving a culture that is familiar for one that is totally foreign. For most, if not all, adoptive parents, the imagined future life of their new child is already conjured up in their minds before the child arrives at their home.

Signe Howell and Diana Marre, in a study of Norwegian and Spanish adoption practices, write that, “adoptive parents activate a meaningful discourse of belonging through, we suggest, a discourse of destiny” (2006:300). This discourse begins with the images that adoptive parents see when they begin the adoption process. As an example, here is an excerpt from a personal blog entitled “Russian Adoption”, of a young couple based in the state of Florida, who adopted two boys from Russia. Here, the wife writes that,

I've been given such amazing peace about our children. I know they are coming home soon and that things are going to start moving forward again. ... We have also asked that they [their adoption agency] do not send us any photos of our future children, having faces to fall in love with has made this loss all the harder. Please pray for us, for the children we lost, the children that will one day be ours and for reaccreditation [Entry, March 26, 2007].

Since the couple applied for the adoption of two young boys, they have seen photos of several different boys who were available for adoption, and then were not. This couple experienced a series of difficulties with their agency, since they applied for adoption in 2007, when all foreign agencies were undergoing reaccreditation by the Russian government. For this couple, they were not certain they would be able to adopt at all. The language that is used in this excerpt is very interesting, because even though the wife has not seen her future children, she knows they are somewhere in Russia. Her use of words like "our" show a knowledge that she *will* get *her* children someday.

It is hardly the case that adoptive parents will imagine a future where the child is guaranteed to bring problems with them in their "backpack." The "backpack" was discussed in a separate article by Signe Howell, and it refers to the fact that adopted children do not have a clean slate, so to speak, when they arrive in their new country (Howell 2004). Even though parents may think the child can make a brand new start by leaving their past behind, the child still carries with it the emotions, memories and experiences of its life prior to adoption. The "backpack" eventually has to become unpacked once the child is with his or her new family.

Signe Howell, writes that, "as far as the adoptive parents are concerned, the child became a living reality to them [the parents] at the moment of the first encounter" (2004:229). Similarly, she quotes the leader of the Association for Adoptive Parents, who states, "transnationally adopted children are *not* born at the airport" (Howell 2004). The view held by some parents that children only become 'real' once they arrive in their new home is obviously problematic. For some of the American parents who abused their

children, they had ignored the life their children had experienced before and what the health and psychological effects of these situations were.

When adoptions from Russia started to grow, not much was known about the psychological or emotional effects inside the “backpack” of institutionalized children, as parents only focused on the fact that children were in need of families and homes, assuming that children would be inherently grateful for the adoption of them. “Waiting children” is an example of such a kind of perception. The blogger from Florida writes that there are “many children who are waiting to be adopted” (2007), and adoption agency websites and brochures provide information for “waiting children”. The idea that adoptable children are waiting to become adopted by foreign parents, is an American notion that is perpetuated through media representations and marketing strategies for intercountry adoption. For example, one American accredited adoption agency, the Frank Adoption Center (2007), advertises that their “waiting list is constantly changing”, and provides a chart of how soon you can expect to adopt based on the child’s age and sex. The agency World Association for Children and Parents (WACAP) states that,

When you adopt a child who is waiting, the adoption process often takes less time, and you may be eligible to adopt a child with a fee reduction and/or no-interest loan. In some cases, you can preview photos and descriptions of children who are waiting, and select the child you’re interested in (2008)

The websites of all U.S. accredited agencies working in Russia advertise the adoption of waiting children. The photographs of these children are displayed with a single image showing the boy or girl smiling. Below each photo is a brief description of the child's age, and his or her hobbies and personality traits. The descriptions contain very positive images that match very well with the provided photograph. There are children not only from Russia, but also from China and Vietnam.

The expedited process of adopting a child that is "waiting", does not seem to acknowledge the "backpack", since there is a rush to have the child adopted immediately. Howell writes that for the parents to understand what is inside the child's "backpack," upon arrival to their new adoptive home, is to acknowledge the pre-adoption life of the child. She writes that once a child is adopted, a "new social birth has been effected. But the child was, of course, already born. It was born by unknown [to the adoptive family] biological parents in an unknown country where unknown people had been engaged in its becoming a person" (2004:229). She connects the "unknown" to a language issue that adoptive parents perpetuate when they say a child is "coming home" when they are adopted, which helps "disguise this fact", that there was a life before adoption (2004:229). Even though Howell is presenting rather general perceptions of adoptive parents, Norwegian intercountry adoption *practices*⁷ differ from American ones in that agencies are mostly "non-profit making NGOs" and they are under "ministerial surveillance" (2004:230). However, the Norwegian *perception* of intercountry adoption is not totally different from American perceptions, as parents eagerly wait for

⁷ Howell states that domestic adoption is "virtually non-existent" in Norway, as "medical provision, cultural attitudes and economic provision enable a pregnant woman to decide whether or not to have the child. Abortion on demand has been available since 1975. Single mothers are not stigmatized and they receive sufficient financial support to enable them to bring up children on their own. These factors have led to few unwanted babies being born, hence, few Norwegian-born babies available for adoption" (2004:227)

the arrival of their new child, and provide for them an 'American', or in the case of Howell's research, 'Norwegian' lifestyle. Howell continues, stating a rather familiar observation, that "in the early days of transnational adoption it was more or less taken for granted that once the children arrived 'home' to their adoptive parents they would rapidly become Norwegian" (2004:231).

The "backpack" that Russian adopted children carry through the adoption process is not only filled with their personal background, but also with a national background as a Russian. Even though there are many cultural notions attached to the orphanage and orphans in Russia, the children are still considered to be Russian. In the next chapter, the consequences of not understanding the contents of the "backpack" will show how Russians responded to the real and perceived treatment of their former children overseas.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter intended to follow significant changes in the American perception of Russian orphaned children. These changes have been strongly influenced by media representations of failed Russian adoptions. However, these changes were not necessarily caused by the media, but rather the media reacted to shifts in how Russian and U.S. societies understood adoptions from Russia. As American parents were focused on the idea of having "white" children, health factors that had been overlooked during the adoption transaction became more and more of an issue. This "backpack" led to a growing American mistrust as to whether Russian orphaned children can be adopted without complications. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this did not

end American adoptions. Instead, this new American perception of Russian orphaned children led American parents to look for “*their*” child, “white” or not, elsewhere.

Chapter 4

The Russian Response to the Murders

“In any culture, people (whether peasants, workers, academics, bureaucrats, businesspersons, or national leaders) do not just act, they act in particular ways because discourse makes these forms of action meaningful, appropriate, and valued” (Nancy Ries 1997:20)

4.1 Introduction

Until it was lifted in the summer of 2007, the 2005 moratorium greatly affected the way Russians and Americans viewed adoption, each other⁸, and orphaned children. The moratorium called for an end to foreigners adopting their children. One of the reasons behind the establishment of the 2005 moratorium was that Russians were becoming more concerned about the loss of Russian orphans through adoption, since it was seen by Russians as a loss of a “national resource”, youth (Pertman 2000). After the Pavlis and Hilt murder cases were reported by the Russian media, the Russian government and general public began voicing fears that the future for orphaned children adopted by American parents would be met with violence in unsafe homes.

Shortly after the implementation of the moratorium, a new government program initiated by the Ministry of Education, called “Adoption in Russia” (2005), appeared on the Internet and listed all orphanages and adoption agencies in Russia exclusively for Russian parents, calling on them to consider adopting orphaned children. The website is called an “online experiment,” and is the only one of its kind in Russia at this time. The larger goals of this website unravel interesting facets of Russia’s view of its future as a “donor nation”. Perhaps the Ministry of Education is trying to alter those cultural ideas of orphans that have prevented parents from embracing the adoption of them. But what is striking and noticeable, is how the website represents Russia’s control over the adoption relationship with Americans.

The website has a very “friendly” atmosphere, with pictures of smiling children and artwork alongside a directory of orphanages across Russia. These sections are only

⁸ By ‘each other’, I mean how Russians and Americans view each other as parents and potential parents. As this chapter progresses it will be seen that these perceptions also flow into ideas of how Americans and Russians are as nationals of their respective country, as the moratorium and adoption became a highly politicized issue that both peoples were viewing in very different terms.

in Russian, and it was not until the year 2007 when English, Italian, French and Spanish pages were added, but only to inform potential parents of the rules for adopting a Russian child. This website was produced once the moratorium was in place, and represents a new age in the adoption relationship. How this website represents a change in the Russian-American adoption relationship will be discussed later in this chapter.

This chapter predominantly describes the Russian media responses to the thirteen murders and how a Russian moratorium on foreign adoptions was a response to Russian perceptions that Americans have gained too much control over the adoption program. The American response to the Russian orphaned child in the 1990s mutated into a corrupted view of children as an object. When this happened, Russian perceptions toward Americans as violent people who kill adopted children dominated the adoption discourse that was represented by the Russian media. Adoption started to become an outlet for Russian frustrations toward Americans in general. This chapter also delves into certain governmental actions and public opinions that took place to end foreign adoption, and Russia's connection to Americans.

4.2 The Russian Response to the Murders

After the American and Russian reports of the adoption murders, varying sentiments and perceptions of adoption and orphaned children were heightened to a rather urgent level. As the Russian media covers the murders, opposition toward foreign adoptions have become more evident as government officials and the public voice outrage toward the thirteen murder cases in the United States. As one Russian newspaper article states, "[Russia] has been shocked by the notorious trials of adoptive mothers from the U.S." (MosNews 2005). These statements have been common in

Russian newspaper articles reporting the murder cases. The source *Pravda* covered these stories, publishing headlines like, “Russian children abused and murdered by American foster parents” (Pravda.ru 2006). This headline reflects a certain perception about American adoptions that the Russian media became influential in expressing to the public. As Russian reporters covered the murder cases, it increased the drive for the Russian government to set the adoption moratorium. During this time, a new domestic adoption program set by the Ministry of Education was launched, while perceptions that foreign parents are “bad” parents for Russian children were reported in newspaper interviews and polls.

Arjun Appadurai most likely did not have adoption in mind when stating that, “the imagination has become a collective” (1996), but something can be drawn from that statement and linked to the way Russian perceptions of American adoptive parents and practices did become something of a “collective” after the murder cases began to be reported heavily in 2005 (1996). As the Pavlis and Hilt cases began to be covered, Russian news sources of all varieties began to deliver stories of American adoption *practices*. From *Pravda* to *The St. Petersburg Times* to *Vladivostok News*, adoption stories have been frequent topics added to the Russian discourse of the future of foreign adoptions. In an article by Kirill Vasilenko of *Vremya Novostei*, titled, “Russian Orphans: We Won’t Take Them, You Can’t Have Them” he writes that “the adoption of Russian children by foreigners looks slated to undergo its own Iron Curtain period. Yet another child from Russia has been killed in the United States by adoptive parents” (Vasilenko 2005). This is not the only article to express such a sentiment on the adoption murders. Many newspaper articles have covered very similar storylines, but the use of the word

'yet' in the Vasilenko article seems to bring more attention to the idea that the reporting of adoption murders have become rather exhaustive, in the sense that too many murders, as if the crime is a habitual practice by adoptive parents, of orphaned children have occurred. Vasilenko continues,

As is well known, the adoption of children from Russia remains a very problematic practice for potential parents from abroad. Our government continuously speaks that it would like for all these children to remain in Russia. And Russian law enforcement authorities are trying to further complicate the adoption process, even though such tragedies occur in Russia no less frequently than in the United States [Vasilenko 2005].

It is unknown whether "law enforcement authorities" attempted to complicate the process, but it is known that government officials have been working to do so.

Unfortunately this fact is not explained any further in this statement. However, the last line raises a very important issue that should not be left out. Abuses of orphaned and non-orphaned children happen in Russia as well as in the United States every year. This is an important point, because when considering numbers, the adoption murders could be seen as insignificant compared to the high number of murders or abuses of children happening every year. However, numbers do not matter. The fact that these murders occurred was enough reason to end the adoption relationship.

The thirteen adoption murders committed within the last decade became a political target for both Americans and Russians. People involved in the adoption system were directly affected by these murders because they led to changes in the

program, such as new psychological tests and higher adoption fees. The stories also affected Russians' and Americans' understandings of adoption and the larger issues surrounding the significance of the murders, such as what a moratorium could mean for the future of Russian adoptions.

In Russia, the American murders were perceived as a trend toward unacceptable behavior by the people, government and media. The Vasilenko news article covers how the Russian people and government responded to the Irma Pavlis case, and it touches on the growing Russian discourse of ending adoption programs, saying that Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov wants the government to "immediately re-examine the common practice of handing over the nation's young citizens to families abroad" (Vasilenko 2005). As the adoption of children from Russia by foreign parents has indeed been a "common practice" since the 1990s, Russia has seen thousands of orphans adopted by American parents. Adoptions became so common that a U.S. airline flight from Moscow to New York City was dubbed the "Orphan Express" (Cummings 1998). The couple of the Internet Blog "Russian Adoption" even commented on this adoption route saying that their flight to the U.S. from Moscow was "filled with families coming home with their adopted children" (2007). The rate at which children were leaving Russia with American families has been very high.

Vasilenko reports that at the time of his news article, the Education Ministry counted 7,852 orphans adopted by foreign parents, and 7,331 adopted by Russian parents (Vasilenko 2005). Here, the number of domestic adoptions is listed, but not much other information about why people adopt is given. It seems the emphasis rests on the growing number of Americans adopting Russian children.

The Internet news resource “Mosnews.com,” which was no longer active as of 2007, listed several headlines related to adoption fraud and the murders. From reading headlines such as “U.S. Woman Charged for Beating Adopted Russian Handicapped Child” (MosNews 2006a) to “Adopted Russian Child Tortured by Foster Mother to Remain in U.S.” (MosNews 2006b), one could easily see how negative sentiments toward foreign adoption, especially American adoption, have been building. Even though a majority of the headlines are about cases in the United States, there are some stories that cover child abuse in Russia. For example, an article published by Russian News and Information Agency (RIA Novosti) carries the headline, “Over 1,200 children adopted in Russia dead since 1991-expert”, and continues to report that even though many children have died of abuses or by accident in Russia, any independent adoptions “of Russian children by foreign citizens would be banned in Russia by the end of this year [2006] in the wake of the incidents” (RIA Novosti 2006c). This reasoning may seem confusing, as the article presumably covers Russian cases since the headline leads readers into thinking so. Unfortunately, not much detail is presented about the 1,200 children adopted in Russia, the only information we can gather from this article is the number presented in the headline. Why this would bring an end to foreign adoptions is also unknown. What we can gather is that even though children have been adopted by Russians, what is most urgent are the practices of foreign adoptive parents. This article is a good example of how some of the sources are rather ambiguous in their content, which may largely be due to bad translations.

There is a trend in the chronology of the Russian news headlines. After the RIA Novosti article about the 1,200 murders, the very next headline reads, “Senior Russian

Official Calls for Moratorium on US Adoptions” (RIA Novosti 2005a). Shortly after this, numerous headlines about abuses toward adopted children in the United States follow. In an article very similar to others presented in this chapter thus far, Yekaterina Lakhova, Chairwoman of the Russian Parliamentary Committee for Women’s Issues, Family and Youth, is quoted saying “13 Russian children were killed in the United States ... Nothing of that kind has happened in European countries. It is necessary to place a moratorium on the country” (RIA Novosti 2005b). She continues to stress that dual citizenship is a necessity for children being adopted by foreign parents because it “would help to control the children’s living conditions abroad” (RIA Novosti 2005b). What can be concluded from this article is that a strong sense of action, which had been strengthening since the initial reports in 2005, led to the moratorium on foreign adoptions. The strong reactions by the Russian public to the American murder cases eventually led to a discourse on what to do about the state of foreign adoption. What came next was an adoption moratorium, put in place by the Russian government.

The Russian adoption moratorium is an interesting event in the sequence of adoption affairs with Americans. Many sources reporting the moratorium present various dates for when it was actually set in place, which confuses the timing of the ban. Adam Pertman writes in his book that the moratorium was actually set in May of 2000, “Putin's order was being followed sporadically in various regions of the country, but American agencies were working to comply with the new rules” (2000:65). In 2005, a majority of the American and Russian news stories covering the adoption murders report a moratorium being set in that year.

Perhaps the Nina Hilt and Alex Pavlis cases in 2005 sparked such an uproar among Russian people that it reminded them that a moratorium was indeed the answer to stopping foreign adoptions and the risk that more children would be murdered by American parents.

4.3 Children as a National Resource

Adam Pertman writes that “some officials in developing countries worry they are losing their future human resources to wealthy nations exploiting their poverty and internal strife” (2000:64). He continues saying that in the mid 1990s the number of Russian children being adopted by American parents skyrocketed, something that did not “fill most Russians with pride” (2000:65). With the number of adoptions increasing every year since 1995, Russian government officials grew concerned about the potential for corruption, another reason why Vladimir Putin decided to place a moratorium in 2000 (Pertman 2000:65). Concern grew with more and more children leaving their home country, in the midst of economic, political and social instabilities in the mid 1990s. Plus, the intercountry adoption market was growing rapidly with the inclusion of Chinese and Romanian adoptions, yet laws were loosely enforced governing adoption practices by both “donor” and “receiver” countries. With the concern that the rise in adoptions would likely increase the risk of corrupt transactions, Russian discourse on the importance of children and their place and contributions to society became more political. There were three aims of the state in the political arena: to protect the future of orphaned children likely to be adopted by foreigners, to protect the future of Russian society with its youth, and to protect Russia’s integrity as a world power.

The increase in foreign adoption left Russians feeling exposed, as American human rights officers and other aid workers entered a previously closed country, reporting on and photographing observations of embarrassing social and economic difficulties. The Human Rights Watch report (1998) is a prime example of this. The moratorium was an action that not only protected orphaned children, but Russians' national pride.

Discourse about children as a national resource is significant for its affects on the way Russians view orphaned children and the future of their place in society. When first thinking about children as a resource, I was confused as to how orphans fit into the idea. How are orphans viewed as a national resource? The Kirill Vasilenko news article presented earlier in this chapter, "Russian Orphans: We Won't Take Them, You Can't Have Them" (Vasilenko 2005), speaks of a predicament concerning orphaned children in Russia. The fact that the "We Wont' Take Them" statement is not addressed in the article, possibly addresses the issue that Russians are not sure what to do with orphaned children.

In the late 1990s, the American adoption program with Georgia ended with a moratorium. The president's wife, Nanuli Shevernadze, pushed to end their intercountry adoption program because she believed orphaned children should remain in Georgia, and that they should suffer just as the rest of the population has (Pertman 2000). The New York Times covered this incident in 1997, with the headline, "Hands Off Our Babies, a Georgian Tells America" (Stanley 1997). In this article, writer Alessandra Stanley writes,

Mrs. Sheverdnadze ... expressed deep mistrust of the dozen foreign adoption agencies registered in Georgia, accusing them of using bribery and deceit – including exaggerated diagnoses of medical needs – to whisk out healthy babies whom Georgians would be happy to adopt. Having pushed for a moratorium on foreign adoption – in almost all cases this means American adoption – Mrs. Sheverdnadze has pledged to find homes in Georgia for the children who have already been assigned to parents overseas. She casts the issue as one of national identity [Stanley 1997].

On the topic of foreign adoption, there are many parallels between Georgia and Russia. Russian officials have shown similar sentiments as those of Sheverdnadze, especially in light of the Pavlis and Hilt murders. When looking at this excerpt, it is like reading the current adoption discourse in Russia today. It is very similar, if not almost exactly the same. The Russian viewpoint toward American adoption is characterized by the perceived threat of not only losing a national resource, but also of losing a national identity. As Sheverdnadze wanted Georgian children to have a strong sense of identity as being *Georgian*, Russians have expressed very similar sentiments that orphaned children are better off staying with Russian families and knowing what it means to be *Russian*. When American adoptions began to rise in the 1990s, Russians started to see their youth, their future, leave and become Americans.

In the *Russian Life* article by Colin Cummings, he writes that Russians are “beginning to feel like the only place in the world where Americans adopt is Russia” (1998:16). Despite the date of this article, this statement does reflect a very current

sentiment expressed by Russians toward American adoption. Even though adoption numbers have been decreasing in recent years due to the moratorium, the frequency of seeing children leave Russia and move into American homes was seen as an embarrassment that could not be measured in numbers. The Georgian-American adoption relationship saw a very small number of children leave, but actions to end adoptions were seen as a necessary step once “wealthy” Americans started to enter the picture.

Sheverdnadze’s efforts to ban American adoption of Georgian orphans reached Washington, DC in July of 1997. Then President Eduard Sheverdnadze made an official visit to the city, with adoption as one of the top issues to be discussed. At this time, 16 American families had their adoptions on hold while the Georgian Parliament worked on passing new adoption laws (Stanley 1997). As Mrs. Sheverdnadze began her “crusade” to end foreign adoption, many American families who were in the process of adopting a child would have to wait longer until Parliament had decided to pass new laws, but in June of 1997, none of the laws passed. While the American parents were waiting for the adoptions to become finalized, the children they had been promised were being adopted by Georgian families. During this time, none of the American families were able to adopt the child they had met at an orphanage and had become attached to.

Pertman writes that laws for changing how Georgians would adopt orphans were being created by officials “making good on their vow to care for their children”, while in Russia, discussion about their own moratorium was “meant to exhibit compassion without having to produce results” (2000:65). Furthermore, he writes that,

The Russians could implement unilateral improvements for the nearly 600,000 children under state care, but they've shown minimal inclination to do so and have limited resources to expend in any event. Neither reality seems likely to change as a result of Putin's reforms or during the years it would take to negotiate a treaty, assuming one could be finally signed [2000:65].

This was the discussion in 2000, and just a few years later, changes were in the process of being made for the domestic adoption of Russian orphans. The website "Adoption in Russia"⁹ was launched during the time the Alex Pavlis and Nina Hilt murder stories were being heavily circulated in Russian media. Just as foreign adoptions were undergoing a strain, with the strong potential of a total ban, another adoption program started, this one picturing Russian orphans in a different light to attract Russian parents.

As of today, Russian adoptions are steady while most Georgian adoption programs are closed (US Department of State 2006). Some American agencies list that there is some adoption activity with Georgia, but the process is very strict and there are many regulations that prospective parents have to work through in order to adopt a child. Because of this, Georgia is not a popular choice for potential parents. In many adoption brochures today, Georgia is not even presented as an option. Georgia's short-lived adoption program with the U.S. show how the power relationship between "donor" and "receiving" countries is not a simple give and take situation. Even though Georgia was classified as a "third world" country by Americans, Georgia was able to say

⁹ From the translation of the main name found on the website

“no”. The Georgians saw themselves as a nation that needed to close its borders to “wealthy” Americans and to build a sense of national unity. This adoption relationship began at a time when Georgia was newly independent from the former Soviet Union. It seems that national identity was a sensitive issue that needed to be preserved and protected in order to develop as a nation. As children are typically seen as a nation’s future, foreign adoption posed a threat.

Today, other post-Soviet “donor” nations, such as Kazakhstan, are rapidly growing in popularity (Pertman 2000, Volkman 2005). Lisa Cartwright states that the adoption program with Kazakhstan has been advertised by agencies in such a way that would “intrigue Western clients” because children have European, Caucasian and Asian looks. This marketing of ethnicity has added to the popularity of this adoption program. Race in adoption is a very interesting topic but understudied topic. As stated earlier in this thesis, a missionary quoted by writer Colin Cummings compared American adoption habits to shopping for items at a WalMart (1998). Americans have a variety of options when it comes to adoption. They have the ability, and the funds, to pick a country and a child’s race, for whichever reason fits their family structure. Couples typically choose the healthiest children, leaving others behind in orphanages (Cummings 1998). This is just one of the factors contributing to the dislike of Americans as adopters. There is a demand for certain children that reflects a consumer-driven quality in the intercountry adoption system. The positive images painted of orphaned children and descriptions of them in the previous chapters are a prime example of this kind of adoption practice.

4.4 “Adoptions in Russia” - The Russian Online Experiment and the Reaccreditation of U.S. Agencies

Upon opening the website “Adoption in Russia,” viewers are immediately met with a picture of a girl, approximately five years old, smiling and obviously very happy. Above her is a drawing of two children holding hands, with a rainbow in their background. There is also a message from the Minister of Education, A. Fursenko, in which he says that orphaned children should be considered for adoption and that their situation in Russia is dire. His message is interesting in that he is asking Russians to think about orphaned children anew, and that they are suffering and need families. Messages like his are found throughout the website. He is the major voice behind the entire adoption program. Other officials in the Ministry of Education are also quoted, but instead with statements about the government offices involved and what their goals are in matching children with parents. Each month, there is an update about certain orphans, orphanages and the program informing viewers about latest events.

It is interesting to see how “active” this website is from looking at its updates and also the very thorough directory of orphanages throughout Russia that parents can refer to if they are considering adoption. Visitors can also call or e-mail directly the people involved with this program to learn more information about adoption. Drawings done by children continue to decorate other pages of the website, and present a very pleasant feeling upon visiting the pages. When the webpage first appeared in 2005 and 2006, it did not have any information about foreign adoptions or the moratorium. There were also no translated websites in languages other than Russian. This was a significant message, because at this time foreign adoptions were under great scrutiny and basically

banned. Because of this, the website seemed to become rather symbolic for Russians and their views on adoption. Even though these government offices have assisted Russian families in domestic adoptions before, the launch of this website has made adoption very public, something that has not been done before. From various ethnographic accounts, by foreigners and Russians, we have a sense that adoption was always a very quiet subject that people knew about, but chose not to discuss. Since the adoption murders have been received in Russia, adoption and orphaned children have become increasingly public, as more people began discussing the importance of keeping this resource of youth in Russia. But, even though adoptions have become more of a public subject, what has been discussed more openly is the ongoing connection to American adoptive parents. The political discourse against Americans has been masked by the anti-American adoption discourse.

In 2007 the moratorium began to be lifted and the Russian government reaccredited some foreign adoption agencies as NGOs. This allowed American agencies to continue adoptions and to work more closely with the Russian government to ensure a legal, and safe, transaction. On the website, translated pages began appearing in 2007, first in English, and then, later in the year, in French, Spanish, and Italian. These pages give foreign parents information about the adoption process and which agencies to utilize. These pages do not have the same images the Russian ones have; there are no smiling children or online directory of orphanages, just information and laws. I cannot but feel that that these images and drawings, which may not seem very important at first, are left out for a purpose. The website clearly makes *Russian* adoptions a priority, it seems to give Russian parents a feeling that adoption is not a stigmatizing practice and

that there are many children who need them. As for the translated websites, the lack of “friendliness” is a statement as well, almost as if this is the “second chance” for foreigners, especially Americans, to adopt and to do it “right”, according to Russian standards.

Even though the website seems to be friendly and inviting for Russian parents, the “online experiment” as a whole has very political undertones. In 2005, a poll titled, “Adoption of Children From Orphanages”¹⁰ was conducted in 44 regions by the Foundation of Public Opinion (FOP), a group that lists polls on many topics of current affairs in Russia. It consists of twelve questions pertaining to opinions about orphaned children. The first question asks, “Could you adopt a child from an orphanage?” With a sample size of 1500 respondents, the answers were 76%-No, 16%-I could, 6%-Hard to answer, and 1%-I have adopted a child (FOP 2005). Other questions surround foreign adoptions, such as, “Many foreign citizens would like to adopt Russian orphans. In your opinion, should the procedure for child adoption be simplified or toughened for foreigners?” with the answers, 62%-Toughened, 20%-Hard to answer, and 18%-Simplified. In a related question, 51% of people who were polled thought it was better for Russian orphans to be brought up by a Russian family, while 38% said it was hard to answer, and 11% thought foreign families were better (FOP 2005). In connecting these poll questions to the website, it is interesting to see how the government was trying to push domestic adoption with the “online experiment” when 76% of those polled would not want to adopt an orphaned child, but do believe Russian families are better than

¹⁰ This poll was published on the English website of this group. For this poll in particular, the margin of error “does not exceed 3.6%”. Further, “Nation-wide home interviews conducted July 30-31, 2005 in 100 residencies in 44 regions A sample size of 1500 respondents. Additional polls of the Moscow population, with a sample of 600 respondents” 08/04/2005.

foreign ones. When looking at the main homepage for the program and seeing the smiling girl and children's drawings, I am reminded of the way in which American adoption agencies have utilized images of happy children to promote intercountry adoption. Perhaps Russians are marketing their orphaned children, just as Americans have been doing this with foreign orphans to attract prospective parents.

4.4.1 Reaccrediting American Agencies

When the reaccreditation process began and American adoption agencies started to receive positive or negative letters, it severely impacted American parents who were in the process of adopting Russian children. If parents were in the middle of an adoption and their agency was not reaccredited, they more than likely lost "their" children. For those parents whose agency passed reaccreditation, they were able to continue the adoption of "their" children. The blogging couple of "Russian Adoption" was part of this latter group of parents, and their agency, the America World Adoption Association, a Christian-based foundation, was reaccredited. Some agencies display their reaccreditation letter prominent on their websites, such as the Frank Adoption Center which specifically focuses on Russian adoptions. They were reaccredited in June of 2007. Here is an excerpt from this letter from the Russian government.

In accordance with the Regulation on the activity of bodies and organizations of foreign states with regard to the adoption of children on the territory of the Russian Federation and control thereof, approved by

the Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation ..." (Frank Adoption Center 2007).

The letter continues to lay out the regulations of this agreement, stating that the Frank Adoption Center is specifically authorized to conduct legal adoptions between the Russian Federation and the United States. Several other adoption agencies that received accreditation post a copy of their letter and agency license on their homepage on the Internet. This letter is listed with much excitement for its respective agencies; there is typically a statement on behalf of the agency about the joy and relief this letter brings them. This process also gave agencies the opportunity spread this knowledge to prospective parents. For example, the Alaska International Adoption Agency, based in Anchorage, Alaska, stated that,

Adoptions in Russia are in a state of change. For several years the Russian government has been promoting adoptions by Russians, and given the recent economic success of Russia, increasing amounts of Russians are adopting children who might otherwise have been available to foreigners to adopt. ... Many Russian families prefer girls, just as U.S. families often do. Therefore AIA, like other U.S. agencies, faces a reduced volume of girls of all ages potentially available for adoption. In order to avoid very long wait times for referrals, AIA has decided to reduce the intake of clients who request only girls (2006).

This agency shows a very interesting adaptation to the current state of the Russian-American adoption relationship. They have had to reduce the number of parents they receive to conduct adoptions due to the increase in Russian domestic adoptions. While other agencies have noted changes in Russian adoptions, this is the only one I have found that has deliberately changed agency policies to cooperate with the Russian government. Other agencies, like the World Association for Children and Parents, was also accredited to conduct Russian adoptions, but instead of announcing changes in their program, has instead been promoting adoptions in Ethiopia, the current trend among adopting American parents.

It is unclear how the website "Adoption in Russia" will influence the future of domestic adoptions and it is difficult to find any Russian reports about the impact that the website is having. The focus tends to center on the fact that foreign adoptions have become so problematic that something needed to be done. The answer to this problem was a moratorium and a government supported program promoting adoption for Russian families. Whether the cultural notions of orphaned children having "bad blood" will change remains to be seen. What we can see is that adoptions between Russians and Americans have become something larger than the care of orphaned children; they have become a political topic laden with issues of national identity and national pride. The political issue behind the ban on foreign adoptions has been central to this chapter, because it shows how Russians took control of a program that was, for almost a decade, in the hands of Americans. Through the presentation of Russian children on the "Adoptions in Russia" website, adoptions in Russia are becoming a hotly contested

topic. In the concluding chapter to follow, I will further discuss the idea of Russians embracing orphaned children for adoption.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

“Adoption in its multiplicity is a window in a cultural edifice through which we glimpse the irreducible truth of the constant flux and motion of culture as it reproduces itself and changes itself in doing so” (Bargach 2002:12).

5.1 A Changed Russian-American Relationship.

The Russian-American adoption relationship has undergone drastic changes since the 1990s. The generation of American parents who adopted Russian children in that decade are now raising their children as Americans, who are growing into their teenage and adult years. As Americans became more aware of economic, political and social issues in Russia, they saw how orphaned and abandoned children were living in those conditions in state-run institutions. The American perception that Russian orphans are helpless and need stability in the form of a family paralleled a more general perception that Russia is unstable and in need of order. Upon viewing children in the Human Rights Watch report (1998) and various television programs, the American perception of Russia as a “third world” country was, in a way, solidified.

This perception of a “donor” country as belonging to the “third world” not only applies to Russia, but also to other countries active in the intercountry adoption system today, such as Ethiopia and Vietnam. In the Internet Blog, the “The Accidental Russophile”, the writer states “American families are fulfilling a need in adopting foreign children, both from Russia and elsewhere” (2006). This “need”, whether it is out of humanitarian concern or racial preference, has been addressed throughout this thesis. The act of adoption turned out to be not only a transaction between an orphaned child and an adopting family, but also an exchange between a wealthy country and one considered “underdeveloped” or less fortunate.

“Why do Americans adopt Russian children and kill them?” is a question the Accidental Russophile posts on one blog entry. It is a question that was posed to him by a Russian colleague. The blogger also states that he believes the negative media attention Americans have received in connection with the adoption murders is a response to “hurt

pride”, and that there exists a “desire to vilify the U.S. at any available opportunity” (2006). He continues to describe that the Russian media portrays orphanages as being “tender and caring places.” The Russian media resources I have consulted do not portray orphanages as caring places. There are Russian perceptions that orphanages are not the most “tender” places (Fujimura et al. 2005). However, in my fieldwork experience, the one orphanage I visited supports the view that not all orphanages fit the negative perception that all institutions are dark and uncaring places.

In the 1990s, when the adoption program from Russia was getting under way, it seemed that adopting a child from an orphanage was a way of saving a child. With the portrayal of orphanage life by media and human rights officers in this decade, national “pity” expressed by Americans toward “suffering” children, seen as helpless and in need of a family, was conveyed through the act of adoption. American parents imagined intercountry adoptions as an exclusively positive event with the new child looking forward to a “typical” American middle-class upbringing with good schooling and many extracurricular activities. Signe Howell states that the concentration on the future often leaves the child’s past buried. She writes that, “there is little, if any, direct interest in the child’s origins; everyone looks towards the future. Unequivocally, the child becomes its adoptive parents’ child” (2004:239). The seemingly happy ending of the child’s safe arrival to his or her new American family did not mean that the past had been erased. This attitude that the past of an adopted child had no relevance for its future was quite common among American parents, almost as if that attitude could have solved any issues that plagued the child.

The perception of saving a child, and the prospect of providing a future, was one of the driving forces behind the success of many Russian adoption programs in the 1990s. Published images of orphans in Russia grabbed the attention of Americans and sparked a strong emotional response. Howell writes that intercountry adoptions often provoke parents to believe that “fate somehow plays a part” (2004:233). Issues of race have been important and controversial topics in intercountry adoption. For some families, race is not an issue but for others it is. In the way adoption is marketed to Americans, these concerns or choices are rather convenient for parents, who can basically pick and choose the characteristics they would like in their child. As Elizabeth Larsen stated previously, it is like choosing “menu items” (2007).

While American parents were imagining happy endings with their adopted child, the Russian media began reporting particular cases where adoptions were starting to go wrong. The news of the murder cases, posed for the Russian imagination an idea that Americans are violent parents. By the year 2000, Russians began to express some concern for the rate at which orphaned children were being adopted by American parents. This led first to a moratorium set by President Vladimir Putin to ensure no corruption would be involved in the adoption of Russian children (Pertman 2000). Since then, as adoptions continued to increase, so did news that some adoptions ended in death. In 2005, the stories of the Pavlis and Hilt cases became the “last straws” for the Russian adoption program. The moratorium was set in full force that year, ending the foreign adoption of Russian children. These stories were covered heavily by Russian media news sources. Russians responded to the stories with anger, saying children should stay in Russia and that Americans should be banned from adopting them.

American news sources responded to the Russian news with fear that orphaned children will never be able to have families, their “happy ending.” The very different sentiments corresponded to the way the media covered the stories represented the way people in each society were viewing each other during this time. Adoption was the focus of these stories, but only as one of the many layers within the complicated Russian-American relationship.

Since 2005, Russians have been advised by their government to consider adopting orphaned children. With the launch of the website “Adoption in Russia,” organized by the Ministry of Education, the discussion about adopting Russian children became a very public topic. The way children are shown on the website paints a new picture of the future for adoption in Russia. In light of the moratorium and ban on foreign adoption, the website sends a message that orphaned children need to be reconsidered, so that their future is *in* Russia with a Russian family. Although this website promotes and markets domestic adoption, there is an underlying but unspoken message that adoptions by foreigners needs to be closely monitored, if not stopped entirely. The attention this website received by the media is indicative of concerns about Russia’s grasp on foreign adoptions, and of foreign influences in general. The lift of the moratorium in 2007 coincided with Russia’s growing control of the role of foreign, especially American, adoption agencies in the country and a series of reaccreditations of foreign agencies as NGOs began. These approved adoption agencies are now listed on the “Adoption in Russia” website, followed with a very succinct list of requirements expected from parents before they decide to adopt a Russian child.

Jamila Bargach states that adoption is a “window” in the “constant flux and motion of culture as it reproduces itself and changes itself in doing so” (2002:12). In this thesis we have seen how the Russian-American adoption relationship has changed since the early 1990s. As American adoptions from Russia have been represented both negatively and positively by the media, these representations are expressions of how Russian and American societies have been viewing each other over the last fifteen or so years. Adoption is one of many windows through which both societies have perceived each other.

Images of orphaned children have played an important role in perpetuating the perception that Russia is not a “developed” country, according to American standards, thereby making it a “third world” nation. Not surprisingly, this perception has been rejected by Russians, who do not see themselves as living in an “underdeveloped” country. Placing a moratorium on foreign adoptions did not change American perceptions. Instead, many Americans started to think that the Russian people do not want to help orphaned children, but use them as tools in political controversies with the West. Even though it was American parents who murdered their Russian child, it seems as if Americans are not wanting to see the problems *they* caused by their actions, but instead consider Russia to be the *root* of the problem.

For many Americans, pity for the situation of Russian orphans diminished once news began to be reported that children brought up in institutions bring a rather heavy “backpack” with them. In her media interview, Peggy Sue Hilt warns prospective parents about the difficulties of adopting from Russia. Her experiences with her daughter and the trial of her death alarmed Americans about Russian adoptions. Since

the American media reports of the murder trials, the effects of FAS, and the politics of Russian adoptions, interest in Russian children has decreased. While American parents have not abandoned the idea of adopting an orphaned child, they have slowly begun to search for “their” child elsewhere in places other than Russia. This trend continues today, as Russian adoption numbers are dwindling. Given these difficulties, the main reason why some Americans continue to adopt from Russia, seems to be the prospect of adopting “white” children.

Adam Pertman (2000) has discussed how adoptions have often responded to international crises, such as World War II. The map of intercountry adoption and American adoption practices today is very different than it was half a decade ago. The Russian-American adoption relationship is still very young; the program has been active, intermittently, for a little over a decade. As we have seen, there have been other related adoption programs, like Georgia, that did not last even a decade. As the list of “donor” and “receiving” nations change over time, so do adoption practices, which are constantly influenced by changes in society, politics and economics. In addition, adoption is greatly affected by changes in social perceptions and media representations. Media has the power to inform and influence readers about larger social and cultural issues. Reading these news stories, can sometimes inspire a need for action, whether it is to encourage a particular practice or to stop it. What the Russian moratorium called for was an end to poor adoption practices, a flawed adoption system, and a step toward gaining control its own country. Now that the moratorium has been lifted, Russians are in stronger control of its adoption program with foreigners. But most importantly,

Russians are redressing the “hurt pride” of which American adoptions was one of the symptoms.

5.2 The Next Step?

Anthropologist Richard Fox posed the question, “How can anthropologists work in and write about the world at present?” (1991:1). While I do not have an encompassing answer to this question, my own experiences may help to address this question. Because this thesis topic involves media and the Internet, this shows a change not only in the way anthropologists can conduct research, but the way they can discuss topics like adoption, which is a subject readily available through the Internet. There is a certain mutation of how societies view children that makes adoption, as a topic of inquiry, difficult to understand.

Boltanski (1999) states that distance is something perceived to be real, and Cartwright (2003) states that distances have become shortened due to advances in technology. The most challenging aspect of this fieldwork has been that there really is *no* distance between Russians and Americans in adoption. This might help explain why changes in the Russian-American adoption relationship happened rather quickly; after all, the conflict was dominantly displayed and argued through the Internet.

The information I gathered in Russia, through interviews and observation, involved perceptions about Americans. In the United States, I have gathered perceptions about Russians, through observations of Internet activity like websites, blogs, and reports. This kind of research is the nature of adoption today in this era of intercountry adoption. It is in a digital world where distance is not an issue, where parents can view “their” children from the comfort of their home. Through my research, I was a

participant in the digital forum of the Russian-American adoption relationship. Like parents learning about Russian culture and orphaned children through the Internet, I placed myself in a similar position as a researcher.

American adoption practices appear to be following trends, or fashions. In some eras of American history, children from certain countries were seen to be more “popular” than others. American celebrity adoptions have become famous, notably the many adoptions done by actress Angelina Jolie, who has children from Vietnam, Cambodia and Ethiopia (Larsen, MotherJones, 2007). Her adoption of a little girl from Ethiopia sparked huge interest in the orphaned children of this country, and it is today one of the fastest growing intercountry adoption programs. This trend may not be solely attributed to Jolie’s adoption, but several adoption advocates and journalists, like Elizabeth Larsen, connect the program’s increase to the popularity of the actress and her adoption (Larsen 2007).

Russia has been losing its popularity among American parents since 2005; as it became more difficult and complicated to adopt from Russia, people began to lose interest. With the rise of interest in adoptions from other countries, it is most likely that Russia will continue to decrease in popularity as a “donor” country. Given that trend, will Russian orphans be marketed more aggressively by Russian agencies to Russian parents? Will the Russian perception of orphaned children change? If orphaned children will remain in Russia will Russian society continue to care for them, notwithstanding Russian-American relations at the time? While many of these questions remain difficult to answer, it seems the clear perception about adoptions from Russia are becoming more and more unpopular among Americans.

As American interests have swayed over time from one “donor” country to another, we can clearly see that intercountry *relations*, is what determines the fate of intercountry adoptions. Adoption relations are obviously a reflection of broader intercountry relations. While Americans adopted Russian children out of pity for Russians, Russians saw adoption as one of many ways in which Americans humiliated Russians. Thereby, Russia has presented a particularly interesting case of the complexities of intercountry adoption.

Since Russia has started to control adoptions by foreigners, domestic adoptions have taken on a different “look”. The “Adoption in Russia” website has very marketable features that have not been used before with Russian orphans. Just as Lisa Cartwright (2005) described the importance of images of orphaned children for American parents wanting to adopt, the question arises whether the same thing could happen for Russians. American parents have used the Internet to familiarize themselves with Russian orphaned children; what effects will the internet presence of Russian orphaned children have on Russian parents?

The Russian-American adoption relationship has been on a downward spiral for several years, and it seems obvious that it will continue to be so in the next years to come. What is interesting here is that for the first time, American adopters were criticized for their adoption practices from a “donor” country. In the same way as American parents thought that Russian children will be grateful for being adopted, they felt that country from where the orphans were “saved”, Russia, should feel grateful toward Americans. Although Americans might eventually abandon Russian adoptions altogether, most likely this will not change the unequal relationship between donor and

receiver countries. American parents will continue to search for children in other countries, especially in those that provide easy access. I am aware that this raises more questions than it answers but nevertheless hope that this thesis has contributed to understanding some of the complexities of the intercountry adoption system in general and of the Russian-American adoption relationship in particular.

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