ANALYSIS

The Russian Diaspora in the US

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Abstract

Russian emigrants came to the United States in waves, with participants at various times representing different groups and having different reasons for coming. The most recent emigrants are much better prepared for life abroad and are able to preserve their culture and ties with their homeland to a much greater extent than their predecessors.

Waves of Emigration

Today there are about 3.1 million Americans of Russian descent living in the United States, according to 2008 Census data.[1] Only a fraction of these citizens, however, were actually born in Russia. In 2008 864,000 individuals reported that they primarily spoke Russian at home. This number has been growing rapidly in recent decades and Russian is now the eighth most popular language in the US.

Russian explorers first came to America in the 17th century, setting up their first settlements in Alaska and California. The first wave of large-scale migration took place between 1880–1920. This group of emigrants was mostly made up of individuals and groups fleeing religious persecution at home. These groups included Jews and various Christian groups that broke off from the Russian Orthodox Church, including the Molokans and Old Believers.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war led to another wave of emigration, thanks to the exodus of people who feared the new Bolshevik government. Typically these "White Russians" were members of the nobility, czarist officers, and intellectuals. Many of these migrants initially hoped to return to Russia after the collapse of the Communist regime, but they eventually adapted to American life and assimilated into it.

World War II sparked another wave of emigrants from the USSR. This wave included citizens of the Baltic states who did not want to recognize the Soviet occupation, prisoners of war reluctant to return home, young people who had been brought to fascist Germany as forced labor, and those who did not want to live under the Soviet system. The number of Soviet emigrants to the US during 1941 to 1950 was as high as 550,000. These migrants had no intention of returning to their homeland and sought as quickly as possible to learn English and restart their careers in their new country.

The next wave of emigrants came in the 1960s and 1970 and consisted mostly of people leaving for political reasons. The Soviet regime let many dissidents go, figuring that it was better to be rid of these people rather than face international criticism for persecuting them. Figures like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky were effectively forced to leave the country. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviets allowed more Jews to emigrate and they typically went to Israel or the US. However, after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the sharp Western criticism of this move, the Soviets tightened the emigration procedures for Soviet Jews.

The largest wave took place around the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Between 1990 and 1999, more than 433,000 former Soviet citizens came to the US and became permanent residents. The largest group among this wave was people declaring that they would be persecuted if they returned to the USSR. Many were scientists and engineers who found few job prospects and low salaries at home. These immigrants made a major contribution to science in the US and helped develop many American software companies.

This group adapted well to life in the US and, in contrast to their predecessors, were able to maintain ties to Russia. They created their own Russian-American society, which brought together the values and traditions of both cultures. The established their own Russian-language media, established Russian-language day care centers, and sponsored cultural activities. By 2000, Russian households had an average annual income of $51,000, topping the non-Hispanic White population's average of $46,000.

Making a Life in America

Russian-speakers in the US hail from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds. This diversity is a result of the amount of time spent in the US, the region or country of origin, and such factors as income and level of education. Nevertheless, these Russian speakers share an attachment to Russian/Soviet culture and traditions and these customs serve to unite them into social networks in their new home.

These networks are based on various determinants. Often people who knew each other in their homeland maintain strong connections after emigrating. Jewish community centers in the US often facilitated such connections. Similarly, many Russian networks are based on people working in the same profession. For example,

1 http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0052.pdf

those who work in information technology (IT) often share information about job vacancies, job-search strategies, and ways to obtain more training. The same is true for a wide range of scholars, many of whom maintain ties with scholars across the US, including friends they knew in the Soviet Union. Others build networks around the Russian Orthodox Church. This institution brings together members of different emigrant waves and people with different levels of adaptation to American lifestyles.

Many emigrants are interested in passing on the Russian language to their children. Therefore they send them to Russian language nursery schools and other schools and camps that provide a variety of educational services. Similarly the Russian Orthodox Church provides organizations for young people to ensure that they maintain their religious ties. All of these activities naturally build informal social networks. Day Care for Adults, which provides services for senior citizens, plays a special role in these networks and helps bring together older emigrants as well as their younger descendants.

Many emigrants go to Russian stores, where they can buy the products familiar to them from their youth including goods which are usually not available in American stores. Many of these stores sell and rent Russian books, videos, and music. Russian-language bookstores are often informal cultural centers, which organize concerts, dances, and cooking classes that give people a chance to get together.

Russian-speakers often meet at concerts of itinerant Russian musicians and singers or to watch traveling theater productions. Festivals for rock music and bard balladeers are particularly popular. Across the US, Russian emigrants often organize such festivals at American camp grounds for two to three days, bringing together anywhere from a dozen to 2,000–3,000 performers and fans. Every minute of these gatherings is filled with performances and non-stop networking among the campers, who include residents of the US and guests from Russia, Canada, Israel and other countries. Participants in these festivals are representatives of a distinct subculture, for whom high levels of communication and efforts to preserve and expand their social networks is typical.

Today's emigrants maintain numerous channels of communication, including print and electronic journals and newspapers, and e-mail distribution lists. Usually an informal group leader will set up the electronic distribution networks and ensure that they continue to function. These communication channels provide information about cultural events as well as advertisements for Russian-speaking lawyers, doctors, real estate agents, and tax specialists, and a variety of other service providers.

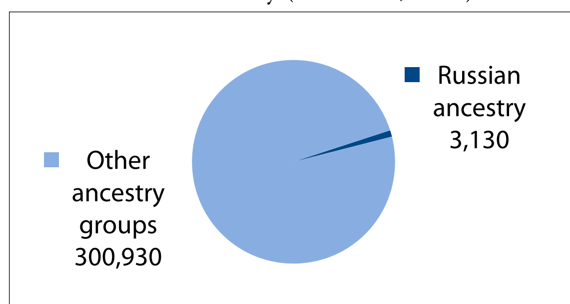
The opening of the iron curtain removed the former limits on traveling between countries. Now the relatively comfortable incomes of the emigrants make it possible for them and their family members to regularly visit Russia. The Internet facilitates daily contact with friends and relatives there, watching Russian television, and receiving all kinds of information. The new emigrants do not leave behind an isolated country; rather, thanks to globalization, they are now much better prepared for living conditions abroad.

About the Author
Maria Belousova is a Russian emigrant living in Washington.

STATISTICS

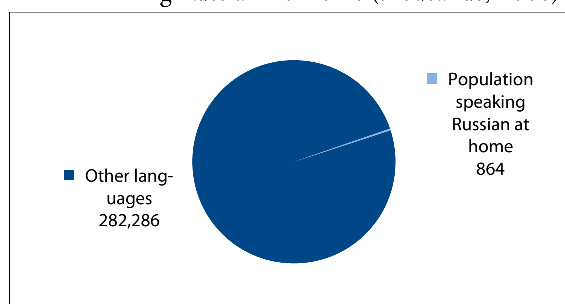
Russian Immigrants in the USA

Figure 1: Total Fraction of US Population of Russian Ancestry (thousands, 2008)



Source: http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/11statab/pop.pdf

Figure 2: Total Fraction of US Population* Speaking Russian At Home (thousands, 2008)



* *Five years old and older*

Source: http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/11statab/pop.pdf