



The "Children Of Perestroika" Come Of Age

Young People Of Moscow Talk
About Life in the New Russia
Deborah Adelman

The "Children Of
Perestroika"
Come Of Age

Also by Deborah Adelman

The “Children of Perestroika”

Moscow Teenagers Talk About Their Lives and the Future

The "Children Of Perestroika" Come Of Age

**Young People Of Moscow Talk
About Life in the New Russia**

Deborah Adelman

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*For the new generation:
Andre, Gabriel, Glenna, Lucas, and Maya Florence*

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Preface

In 1989 I had the opportunity to spend six months conducting in-depth interviews with a group of Moscow teenagers, fifteen to eighteen years old, from diverse backgrounds. The interviews, published in 1991 in *The "Children of Perestroika,"* offered a view of life in Moscow during a period of radical change as seen through the eyes of adolescents. My conversations with these young people covered a wide range of topics, including family relationships, economic and political reform, and the teens' hopes and expectations for their own future and the future of their country, at that time still the Soviet Union.

I was curious about general issues such as family, intergenerational, and male-female relationships; leisure and recreational activities; hopes and desires for the future; and the degree to which the teenagers felt empowered to determine what their lives would become. But I was equally interested in discovering the specific issues that Soviet teenagers faced in 1989, especially the effects of *glasnost* and *perestroika** on their lives and thinking. During the time I spent getting to know these teenagers, in their schools and homes, accompanying them on excursions in Moscow and beyond, I was impressed by their excitement about the changes occurring in their country and their developing involvement with urgent social and political issues. But their eagerness to discuss their country and the events unfolding within it was

*The reader will find explanations of these and other special terms in the glossary.

matched by a realistic assessment of the problems that lay ahead. Although many of the teenagers felt that their generation was already quite different from preceding ones, they viewed perestroika and glasnost as the beginning of a long process of change, and identified themselves and their peers as representatives of that beginning. They described themselves as more involved and less afraid than their parents' generation, but perhaps not quite yet "children of perestroika." Theirs is a generation caught between rejection of the old ways and a full embrace of the new.

The eleven teenagers came from variety of social backgrounds and had different career and work aspirations at the time of the interviews. Some of the teens were studying in general academic schools, while others had enrolled in the vocational schools that prepare young workers to enter industrial jobs upon graduation. The difference between these types of schooling is significant. The choice between an academic or technical-vocational track, made upon completion of the ninth grade,* has long-term ramifications for students. Academic-track graduates prepare to enter an institute of higher education. Technical-vocational students train for white- and blue-collar occupations while simultaneously completing the universal secondary curriculum and are expected to enter the work force upon graduation. Vocational education is stigmatized, and students often end up in vocational schools on account of disciplinary or social problems rather than a commitment to any particular trade. Vocational students have the reputation of being unmotivated low achievers. In the group of eleven teenagers, four were attending vocational school. At the time of the interviews—close to graduation—they faced immediate job assignments and military service, all of which they considered highly undesirable. The teenagers attending academic high schools were planning to pursue a higher education and were worried about the highly competitive entrance examinations they faced.

*Secondary education extends to the eleventh grade.

Gender differences also proved to be important. The boys' views of male-female relations in general and their own future family relations were without exception patriarchal. Most of them felt that women should not work at all or that a woman should work only if she chooses to, but in that case she still must bear the primary responsibility for child-raising. The boys felt that it is a man's responsibility to provide for the family. But the girls all had educational and career aspirations, and although many agreed in principle that men should be the main providers for the family, they had no intentions of staying home to raise children and becoming dependent upon a husband. The girls in particular were aware of the double burden placed upon Soviet women—full participation in the work force, along with the major responsibility for housework and child care in a society with scarce consumer amenities.

Despite their many differences, however, all the teenagers were caught up in the major events occurring in the Soviet Union, whether they fully supported the changes or not. With rare exceptions, the teenagers showed striking awareness and interest in political and social developments.

In the summer of 1992 I returned to post-Soviet Moscow to meet with the teenagers and find out how the tumultuous changes that had taken place in the past three years had affected their lives and their plans for the future. I also wanted to bring each young person a copy of *The "Children of Perestroika,"* which they had been eagerly awaiting. It was not my intention to conduct another series of interviews since I believed that some years would still have to pass before these teenagers would find their place in adult society. But I arrived to discover that tremendously important events had taken place in these young people's lives and had placed them squarely in the middle of adult life: they faced important decisions about work, career, marriage, and children; they were experiencing the rising social tensions and economic difficulties of their country directly. What I had expected to be brief conversations to "catch up" on events in

their lives turned into lengthy, animated discussions revealing both disillusionment and hope. The young people express bitterness about failing new economic policies and increasing poverty and crime, but at the same time they still believe that the lives of ordinary Russians can improve and, more important, that they can personally play some role in ensuring that outcome. The excitement and enthusiasm I had found three years earlier were gone, but they had not been replaced with indifference.

Upon returning to the United States, I reviewed the taped interviews and was struck by the breadth of post-perestroika experience they contain. There are great differences in the ways each of these young people and their families are coping with the changes taking place in their country. For some the changes have meant greater economic hardship than for others. Some are having an easier time accepting new attitudes toward work, study, and the importance of making large amounts of money. Some have turned to religion to replace Soviet ideology and the values it represented, although baptism and church attendance have not been accompanied by an exploration of church doctrine or Christianity and Christian tradition in general.

In their often ambivalent attitudes about work, military service, religion, higher education, and lifestyle choices, these young people reveal a generation still caught between the old and the new, a generation not yet ready to abandon totally the values and attitudes that are part of the Soviet legacy, yet also not ready or sure how to incorporate themselves fully into a new way of life—especially economic life—in the new Russia. Their stories thus once again offer us an intimate view of life at a remarkably dynamic and volatile moment of Russian history.

Summer 1993

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My editor at M.E. Sharpe, Patricia Kolb, gave the initial suggestion to write up material from the new interviews, and her enthusiastic response turned this into a book.

John T. Cabral read the manuscript in progress and offered helpful critical commentary. Anne Meisenzahl helped me sort through the issues raised by the new interviews when I first returned from Moscow.

And of course thanks to John and Norm for the many hours of child care that allowed me to finish this manuscript, and to Sharon and Reinaldo for being there for me during all the events, large and small, that took place during the time I was writing this book.

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From Teenagers to Young Adults, 1989–1992

TANYA

In 1989, at the age of sixteen, Tanya was already planning a career as a teacher. From a working-class family, Tanya spoke of joining the ranks of the “workers’ intelligentsia,” which she viewed as a necessary link between workers and intellectuals. Class mobility and the gulf between workers and professionals were important issues for Tanya when she decided on a career in teaching.

Now nineteen, Tanya has finished her second year at a new experimental pedagogical college, where she is studying to become a primary-school teacher. She has one more year of studies to complete her training.

Tanya planned to marry her boyfriend, Seryozha, in September 1992. Seryozha is finishing his studies at a military school in Moscow, where he is training to become a border guard.

OLYA

In 1989, just short her eighteenth birthday, Olya graduated from a vocational school, where she completed her secondary education and was trained as a printer in a polygraphics factory. Upon graduation, an unhappy Olya received a two-year work assignment at the same factory. Although it had been Olya’s decision to leave the academic track after the

ninth grade,* by the time she graduated vocational school three years later she had come to regret her choice. She felt that she had made it at an age when she did not understand its implications for her future.

Avoiding the work assignment, Olya made several attempts to find satisfying work and eventually took a clerical position at a transportation agency, where she has been working for a year and a half.

Olya's mother is a factory worker who moved from a provincial city in order to marry. Olya's father is a construction worker, not steadily employed. When I met Olya in 1989, her parents had recently divorced. The family continues to live in the same apartment together, however, due to the complications of Moscow's severe housing shortage and Olya's father's refusal to leave the family home and take a room in a communal apartment,† which has been the only possible alternative.

LENA

Lena, at sixteen, was quite excited about glasnost and the process of perestroika. During her last year of secondary school she participated in numerous demonstrations and experienced a political awakening.

Lena took the competitive entrance exams to enter Moscow State University's School of Journalism immediately upon graduating secondary school. She was not accepted on her first attempt and had to wait a year until she could try again. In the meantime, she took a job as a correspondent for a small newspaper to help prepare her for the next

*For clarification of educational terms, please see the glossary.

†Communal apartments house two or more families, each family residing in a separate room but sharing kitchen and bathroom facilities. Communal apartments are generally found in old, run-down, unrenovated buildings and are one of the least desirable forms of housing. Their continued existence is indicative of the severe housing shortage that plagued the Soviet Union and continues into the present.

exams. Her second exams gained her entrance into the correspondence section of the School of Journalism. She continues to work, at a new job in a film studio, while she pursues her studies. Now nineteen, Lena has finished one year at Moscow State.

Lena's father is a film director for television. Her mother, also a film director by training, produces programs for a radio station.

ILYA

In 1989, at seventeen, Ilya was completing his secondary education at one of Moscow's elite special English schools and was working hard to gain admission to Moscow State University. An avid reader and well informed about the developments in his country, he could already be considered a "Moscow intellectual." Ilya noted that his family is Jewish and that he had been raised in dissident circles. He proudly considered himself a progressive and independent thinker. He identified himself as a supporter of the Soviet "opposition," the reformers who were working to move the country toward a market economy.

Now nineteen, Ilya has finished his third year of studies in the Department of Russian Language and Literature at Moscow State University. In 1991 he married Sasha, a classmate from Moscow State. Ilya and Sasha were expecting a child in October 1992.

Ilya's family circumstances have changed quite significantly in the three years since our first interviews. His mother, an economist and researcher, was killed. His older sister emigrated to Israel and plans to join her fiancé, who is on a scholarship and studying at a university, in the United States. His father, a renowned psychiatrist and poet, lives alone.

MAXIM

When I met sixteen-year-old Maxim he was studying to become a chef. He had completed the ninth grade and then

dropped out of school in order to attend culinary school in the restaurant of the Hotel Moscow. In 1989, Maxim spoke of his eagerness to begin the military service required of all eighteen-year-old males, which he felt would help him mature and become disciplined. He hoped to be accepted into the navy, where he wanted to work as a chef on a ship.

Maxim comes from a working-class family. At sixteen Maxim's views conveyed the conservative social and political thinking that many considered to be most representative of the working class, which was less supportive of Gorbachev and his policies than were intellectuals and professionals.

Maxim's father used to work as a trainer for a professional soccer team but now works in a neighborhood health and recreation complex that runs a café and Russian sauna. His mother is a hairdresser in a beauty salon. The family lives in a communal apartment, which means that Maxim, his two younger sisters, and his parents share one room in an apartment inhabited by two other adults who have no relation to the family. In order to gain some privacy and independence, Maxim has spent much of the past three years living with his grandmother, who has a larger apartment in a different neighborhood, and more recently, with friends.

Now eighteen, Maxim finished his course at the culinary school and worked as a cook for almost two years, first in a hotel and then in the cafeteria of a government ministry. Despite his former enthusiasm for military service, he received a deferral and since that time has spent almost a year without any type of employment.

YELENA

As a sixteen-year-old ninth-grade student, Yelena became absorbed by her country's political changes and began to participate in public demonstrations. The political upheaval in her country deepened her interest in its history and led her to decide to pursue studies in a pedagogical institute or university and eventually teach history.

Yelena is the daughter of factory workers. In 1989 she described them as more politically conservative than she and criticized them for the “quietness” with which they had raised her. She imagined that she would raise her own children in a different, more active manner. She noted that her parents “liked to sit at home too much.” The secondary school she attended during the years of glasnost and perestroika, with its politically active principal and atmosphere of open dialogue, had a great impact on her. Unlike her parents, she was enthusiastic about the new ideas that were being discussed and believed they would become the essential catalyst for true economic reform.

Now nineteen, Yelena works at a production training center for students in the upper grades of secondary school (grades 9–11). She does clerical work at the center and also teaches typing and computer data entry.

Yelena has tried to gain admission to an institution of higher education three times but thus far has not passed the entrance exams. Although she enjoys her work, she wants to complete a higher education and is preparing to take exams again.

DIMA

In 1989, Dima, at eighteen, had just completed his secondary education at a vocational school where he learned to repair radio and electronic equipment, and was preparing to report for military service. He was raised in a working-class family and neighborhood. For Dima, perestroika and glasnost were fundamentally related to changes at the workplace and the need to motivate and raise the productivity of Soviet workers. He anticipated working in a cooperative after completing his military service.

Now twenty-one, Dima is currently living in Canada. After completing two and a half years of military service, he joined an agricultural project organized by a youth agency, designed to interest young people in becoming independent farmers.

The project involved an internship with Canadian farm families. Dima decided to stay in Canada, although the internship has ended, because several of the participants in the program have written to him since their return to Russia about obstacles the project is encountering in its next phase that may ultimately result in its discontinuation.

LYOSHA

Lyosha graduated at eighteen from a vocational school, where, in addition to finishing his general secondary education, he learned how to assemble radio and electronic equipment. At the time of his graduation in 1989 he spoke of his desire to continue studying and become an engineer.

Lyosha is from a working-class family. His parents, who moved to Moscow from a provincial town before he was born, are both factory workers. The family travels often to that town, and Lyosha noted that one of the major differences he felt between himself and his parents is that they are provincial, while he has been raised as a Muscovite.

Now twenty-one, Lyosha began his military duty after graduating from the vocational school in 1989. He received an early discharge after six months. Currently he is involved in the same agricultural project Dima joined. After three months in Canada, Lyosha returned to Moscow, took courses at an agricultural institute, and is now trying to establish a small farm outside the city on land rented from a state farm.

ALEXEI

Alexei studied in a vocational school, where he learned carpentry. When I met seventeen-year-old Alexei in 1989, his parents were in the African republic of Burundi, where they had been working for eight years as university instructors of Russian. As a young boy Alexei lived for a number

of years with his parents in Mali. Later, when they began working in Burundi, he returned Moscow to live with his grandmother.

Alexei is from a university-educated professional family, but his lack of interest in school led him to leave the academic track for vocational school. He thus prepared to become a member of the working class, an unusual choice for someone of his background. In 1989 he felt uncertain about his future, characterizing himself as not yet "serious enough" to pursue a degree in higher education although he assumed that eventually he would. He dreamed about becoming a conductor on the Moscow subway.

Now twenty, Alexei graduated from vocational school and received a medical certificate that excused him from military service. Alexei has worked in various places since graduation. He is currently a co-owner of a small optical cooperative and has become something of an entrepreneur.

NATASHA

Natasha, at sixteen, was enrolled in a special ninth-grade class for students who were interested in becoming teachers. She worked for two years in her secondary school as an assistant to a first-grade teacher and found the work gratifying. She praised the experiment as one of the few concrete successes of perestroika and glasnost in her school, although she felt that adults were still reluctant to let children have input into programs or to have any real power.

Now nineteen, Natasha studies in the same pedagogical college that Tanya attends. She has completed her second year and has one more to finish her course of studies and be certified as a primary-school teacher. She feels that her mother's job as a nurse has inspired her to work with people.

In March 1992, Natasha married her boyfriend, Andrei. Natasha and Andrei were expecting a child in November 1992.