Suicide in Russia
Looking at a Cloudy Future
By Jeff Cherry

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, information has become increasingly more available of the lives of the people of this once great empire. The secretive and often times deliberate misinformation by the Communist regime left much to the imagination of what life was like for the citizens of the USSR. Amazing stories of heartache and desperation were met with optimism as the 20\textsuperscript{th} century came to a close. The zeitgeist felt as the Berlin Wall fell and the much feared domino effect was reversed throughout Eastern Europe and the republics of the Soviet Empire were to be short lived. The reality has been anything but optimistic by many throughout this region of incredible potential. A growing wealthy class in Russia has not soothed the economic and social issues that the vast numbers of Russians face as they deal with the failures of the capitalist free for all of the 1990’s. Although profiteers of speculation and the rise of the oligarchs may have been untouched by the crash of the ruble in 1998, most in Russia were not so lucky. Moscow now boasts more billionaires than any city on earth, yet it is safe to say that the quality of life for many has yet to reflect the benefits of the free market system.

What social ills would befall countries citizens with so much hope only to be met with such exasperation? No society is immune to the highs and lows of economic, social, and political upheaval. Russia and many of the newly independent states of this realm now openly have to deal with issues viewed as largely western problems. One such issue has been the rise in violent deaths previously only seen as a political issue. This was not the pogroms of the Tsar or the maniacal behavior of Stalin. Instead a sharp rise in street crime related to the Russian mafia, and petty crime associated with an increase in drug use has made many in the streets of Russian cities feel unsafe. This increase in drug usage especially among the youth has led to a serious increase in the HIV infection rate and a significant growth in the number of deaths from AIDS. Alcoholism in Russia has created health problems in Russia which has produced societal and economic strain. Annual consumption in Russia is estimated to be nearly 15 liters per person compared to
average rates of 10 and 7 liters respectively in the EU and the United States. Alcohol related deaths consistently rank in the top three causes in Russia today.

Yet most perplexing still is the continued rate at which Russians harm themselves. Russians now yearly rank as one of the top three countries in the world in overall suicide rates. Data suggests that some 58,000 Russians take their own lives every year. Russian men are now six times more likely to commit suicide than women. The highest at-risk demographic are men between the ages of 45-54 year olds, with 106.7 suicides per 100,000 according to a report from the Russian ministry of Health. Russian women are most likely to kill themselves after the age of 75, with 27.4 per 100,000 people. Higher rates have been found among soldiers who served in the Chechen wars and current military personnel who are serving in other areas of the Caucasus and bordering Abkhazia region of Georgia. The aim is to shed some light on these trends and some of their potential causes of what some may call a public health epidemic in Russia.

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World Health Organization – 2008
* Former Soviet Republics

Statistically speaking the fact that eight of the top fifteen worst suicide ratios in the world are found in the former Soviet Union is alarming and possibly yet revealing.

Psychology of Suicide

Many psychological issues play a role in the decision of individuals to take their own lives. Every society on earth faces this health care concern. Nor is it just a modern day crisis but one of antiquity as well. Van Gogh’s mental illness and Hemingway’s discontent led to death by self-inflicted gunshots. Judas, however, may have taken his own life, at the end of a rope, due to his guilt. Even the famous Russian author Leo Tolstoy faced such demons. Tolstoy's intervention, he believed, came from God. At the time of his conversion, his choice was between suicide and a life of self-sacrifice. Nothing else was possible; he could not go on living as before. “Either there is no God, and life is a cheat; or there is a God, and life takes its meaning from its divine origin”. What’s true is that people have taken their own lives throughout history. In the modern context, as Thomas Joiner points out in his book; Why People Die by Suicide,

“the extent and diversity of facts related to suicide are intimidating and baffling.

For example, suicide is far more common in men than in women…except in China. In the United States, there has been a recent increase in suicide among African-Americans-specifically, young black men. Any yet, the demographic group at highest risk is older white men. Female anorexics, prostitutes, athletes, and physicians all have elevated suicide rates. A theory that can account for these diverse facts would be persuasive”.

Although, each suicide victim has a personal and unique story, there may be unifying factors related to the people of Northern Eurasia. Each victim leaves loved ones to face many unanswered questions and the anguish of losing a loved one. Despite Joseph Stalin’s axiom, “one death is a tragedy but a million is just a statistic,” pain is felt by all and a society may be able to endure only so much. What factors in Russian society drive these victims to suicide? How far can a society bend before breaking?
Geographic Distribution

Suicide rates are not monolithic across Russia. In a report by the Serbsky National Research Center for Social and Forensic Psychiatry they identified the most problematic regions in Russia. The Koryak Autonomous District in the northern Kamchatka peninsula suffers the highest rate of suicide with 133.5 suicides per 100,000 people. Other autonomous republics or areas with extremely high suicide rates are Komi (110.3), Altai (101.9), and Nenets at (95.7). What is interesting is that there has been an increase in the number of firearms purchased particularly in Koryak. Although in this report the manner of suicides is not discussed, statistically speaking firearms are the number one method used in suicide in males worldwide.

Geographically it appears consistent that rural areas tend to have higher suicide rates than do urban areas, as the Serbsky Report confirms. This was also true of the findings by (Rancans, Renberg, & Jacobsson 2001) which reported on suicide prevalence in both the West and in the former Soviet Union. Despite the lower numbers in cities such as St. Petersburg 17.8 and Moscow 11, suicide statistics are sometimes difficult to measure. Moscow experiences 6 to 7 deaths per week from people falling from apartment buildings. Verifying and concluding the cause of the fall is difficult and may not be included in suicide statistics.

These numbers as compared to the West still paint a bleak picture of the mental health of Russia’s two largest cities regardless of the ambiguity sometimes associated with the cause of death.

Koryak Autonomous district is demographically Russia’s smallest with fewer than 24,000 people, half of which are Russian. Komi, with a much larger population of nearly 1.2 million people are still relatively rural with nearly 58% of their population being ethnic Russian. Koryak, Komi, Altai, and Nenets area all are traditionally Russian Orthodox religiously with significant ethnic minority groups.

Why Russia?

Dostoevsky’s Russia

Measurable data that demonstrates a specific correlation to high suicide rates among the Slavic people of this region are significant and essential. However, the psyche of a group of people is much more difficult to measure yet may be just as significant.
Further study and a complete historical analysis would be even more critical to understanding the current critical suicide issue. What we do know is that it appears suicide is a topic of interest and concern for people prior to even Soviet history. Based on impressions from newspaper articles starting in the 1860’s of Russia, suicide became an open topic of conversation. As Irina Paperno points out in her book, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia*,

> “The suicide epidemic continued to preoccupy public attention until the 1880’s. It was a matter of common opinion that suicide was both a “sign” and a “product” of the age – the era of the Great Reforms, associated with disintegration of the social and moral order”.

The beginning of these reforms started with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. This act alone incorporated millions of peasants into Russian society and partially decentralized authority. Further reforms included the judicial reforms of legal proceedings that were now open to the public, and greater freedom to the press that allowed greater circulation of newspapers and journals. The terms “glasnost” and “perestroika” were used during this period to describe the policy changes that were taking place. Considered liberal and left-leaning, papers such as *Golos* and *SanktPetersburgskie vedomostoi* devoted a great deal of attention to the topic. Special columns in the newspapers reporting on suicides were quite common in the 1870’s. Articles such as this one from *Otechestvenye zapisk* focused on suicide:

> “you need only to read the chronicle of daily events and the transcripts of circuit court sessions, and a kind of terror will unwittingly take hold of you...If we take the last month of the past year and the first two months of this year, we see that in the capitals alone about ten nobleman have either shot or stabbed themselves to death. We do not take commoners into account, because they must be counted by the dozen”.

This had followed much philosophical discussion on suicide throughout Europe and the growing body of belief in the reality of this world which was only accessible through the *senses* and *science*. It became fashionable to replace religion with *nihilism*. However during his tenure as the editor of *Grazhdanin*, Fyodor Dostoevsky seemed to blame this nihilist spirit at least partially for the crime and suicide increase that Russia faced.

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Dostoevsky would of course write about this existential dilemma further in his book, *The Possessed*, as the two main characters Kirillov and Stavrogen commit suicide.

One can conclude that there is a correlation between the reforms of 1860 & 70’s Imperial Russia and the reforms that took place starting the late 1980’s of the Soviet era. It is also quite possible to view the hostility towards religion throughout this period as a possible impetus to suicide. The psychological condition has continued in modern Russia today despite the return of many to the Orthodox Church. It is no less unlikely that the end of the Great Reforms of the 1800’s which came on March 1, 1881 with the assassination of the Tsar, and that the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 were dramatic sociological events that impacted the psyche of the Russian people.

**Since the fall of communism**

There appears to be a body of evidence to suggest that the high suicide rates in Russia since the fall of communism fall into two broad categories: *health problems* and *economic crises*. In looking at some of the specific health concerns the aforementioned problems of alcoholism and the escalating HIV and AIDS crisis. Financially there is significant evidence to suggest that few are better off than they were under the old Soviet system. It’s important to note that despite all the evidence and research completed in the area of mental health and research regarding suicide particularly, very little to this point has been completed at the clinical level to completely understand the mindset of former Soviet citizens that have created this phenomenon.

The health care system of the former Soviet Union was most notably deficient in the area of technology and patient care. Approximately 1/5 of all Soviet hospitals had no indoor plumbing and one in 10 of Russia’s hospitals today were built before WWI. It has been reported that there was a consistent short supply of medicine, syringes, and other medical supplies necessary to function as a modern health care facility. Sadly these statistics and facts can apply to Russia today. There are state-funded hospitals in Moscow for example where latex gloves are unavailable for surgeries and cat scans are virtually impossible to attain. Private hospitals are becoming more common with all the necessities, but for millions on government pensions or suffering from run away inflation this is all but unattainable.
There is also evidence that there is a relationship between citizens who still support socialist ideology and a more negative lifestyle. Individuals who reminisce about the Soviet days of health care have been shown to be more passive in their approach to their own health. According to a survey, pro-socialist respondents demonstrate a less pro-active lifestyle than those who support democratic change. No conclusive data connected to suicide rates is yet available, however if based on other health trends in Russia, it is likely that their will be a strong correlation to passive health care behavior, poor health and consequently higher rates of suicide.

**The Curse of Alcoholism**

Alcoholism is a problem much associated with the people of this realm. In understanding its impact on the drastic suicide rates we have to take a look at some of the facts and stories associated with alcohol consumption in Russia.

Historians in Russia have pointed to a long standing tradition of alcohol’s acceptance in society. As early as 988AD, it is believed that Prince Vladimir chose Orthodox Christianity as the state religion because it would allow the people to drink. The impact of this has even been felt in battle as one story goes. Because of the drunkenness of the soldiers of the Russian Army in 1373, they were defeated by the Tatars and driven into a nearby river. That river became known as the “Reka Piyanaya” or Drunk River. Although early Communism under Lenin spoke of a prohibition against alcohol it was never accepted. Even Stalin provided soldiers in WWII with their daily allotment of 100 hundred-grams of vodka. The word vodka itself is a diminutive for the Russian word for water.

In a story from the book, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the End of Revolution* by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser they relate the all too familiar alcoholism story of today’s Russia. In the town of Volgodonsk in southwestern Russia, a store sponsored an all-you-can-drink Vodka Marathon. The winner, Aleksandr Nakonechny was also the loser. After downing three pints of vodka in quick succession, he dropped over dead before claiming his prize; ten bottles of vodka. It is believed that some 8 million men, 2 million women, and some 500,000 teens under the age of 15 are alcoholics. This should also come as no surprise in a country where beer is now available in vending machines and is not considered an alcoholic beverage.
Jose Manoel Bertolote, who is the coordinator of the Management of Mental and Brain Disorders at the World Health Organization, is a leading expert on global suicide. “There are a quite a few good studies indicating the role of alcohol in suicide rates in the former Soviet Union republics and Russia, in particular,” Bertolote says. “These are very interesting studies showing that throughout the regimes of Andropov and then Gorbachev and then Yeltsin afterward; who had completely different policies on alcohol control. Suicide rates closely followed alcohol consumption. When the policies were more restrictive, less alcohol was available and suicide rates were much smaller. When the alcohol was relaxed, suicide rates increased.” Communist countries such as the former Soviet Union are sometimes hesitant to divulge statistical data that doesn’t support a positive image. However, due to the anti-alcohol campaign of Mikhail Gorbachev and the possible economic reforms of perestroika, suicide rates at 23 to 100,000 were significantly lower than they are today. Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign may have actually contributed unintentially to the growth of bootleg alcohol. It’s estimated that as much as half of the alcohol consumed in Russia today is a homemade vodka brew referred to as *samogen* and *gamyryka*. When the state monopoly on legal alcohol was repealed in 1992, local and international companies took advantage of the market. An increase in supply and an inefficient tax collection by the government, led to alcohol prices remaining low while consumer staples rose. Between 1990 and 1994, there was a 12% decline in life expectancy in Russia that was blamed on alcohol. There is ample evidence that this contributed greatly to other long term effects and a rise in suicides.

As pointed out by William Alex Pridemore, PhD at Indiana University, it may not be just a question of total consumption but rather of heavy and frequent drinking. Vodka accounts for 75% of the alcohol consumed in the country and survey data showed that about one-third of Russian males binge drinking vodka at least once a month. According to a study by (Gruenwald, Ponicki, & Mitchell 1995; Razvodosky 2003; Rossow 2000) frequent and heavy drinking of distilled spirits was the biggest factor in alcohol related suicides. Evidence also exist that hard liquor in particular contributes to higher rates of suicide than do wine and beer cultures. It further appears that acute intoxication may act as a disinhibitor in people predisposed to suicide for social and economic reasons.
Interestingly the suicide rates among Muslim states, including former Soviet states with the exception of Kazakhstan, have significantly lower suicide rates. Islam’s forbiddance of alcohol seems to have had at least some positive affect on the suicide rates in this region. Rates for the central Asian republics are Uzbekistan at 5.6, Tajikistan 2.6, Kyrgyzstan 9.0, and Turkmenistan 8.7 per 100,000. The rate for Kazakhstan at 59.2 shows a higher percentage quite possibly due to the higher percentage of Russians who live in the country. (30% Russian and 44% Russian Orthodox)

HIV and Aids

The first discovered case of HIV in Russia was in 1987 but remained a relative unknown in the late Soviet era. Today Russia has one of the fastest growing HIV and Aids rates in the world. It wasn’t until 1996 when significant numbers starting turning up in several large cities throughout the country. The epidemiological transition is as a result of the social deteriation of the nation and the increase in intravenous drug users. With a health care system in crisis and depressed and marginalized portions of society including many young people, they turned to illicit and illegal drugs such as heroin. Due to the shortage of syringes in hospitals it only seems inevitable that these new recreational and eventual junkies would be sharing needles and transmitting this insidious disease. As has been the case in many countries in the world dealing with such an epidemiologic catastrophe, the disease is not stagnant and has shifted in the case of Russia to many segments of society. Although early statistics suggest approximately 72% of those infected are male, it is becoming more common among women and children. Nearly 50% of all new cases are found among women and children. The spread of HIV has expanded to include the transmission through sexual relations. Those affected by sexual relations is now doubling annually. Sadly, in vitro transfer of the virus to babies from their mothers is increasing dramatically as well. Some 13,000 babies have been born with the virus as of 2005.

Russia’s Ministry of Health estimated in a recent report an estimate of 335,000 HIV positive people in Russia. This number pales in comparison to estimates considered more reliable from the UNAIDS at 560,000 to 1.6 million. By 2010 it could be several million according to this data.
How has this impacted the even greater health concern in this country of suicide? According to WHO data, in most countries people with HIV/AIDS are as much as eight times more likely to attempt suicide. According to Dr. Jose Bertolote of the WHO, says that suicides happen most often at the moment after people learn they are HIV positive. In a study of 207 HIV-positive women in New York City, 26% percent of the women reported attempting suicide since their HIV diagnosis. Of those who made an attempt, 42% acted within the first month after diagnosis and 27% acted within the first week. Dr. Bertolote of the WHO is currently working on further studies showing the relationship between HIV/AIDS and suicide rates. It is quite reasonable to see the connection between the rising HIV/AIDS situation in Russia and the continued high rate of suicide in the country.

The Effects of Macroeconomics on Suicide Rates in Russia

According to Elizabeth Brainerd of Williams College in a report dated 2001, the economic crises of the early 1990’s in many countries within the former USSR saw a dramatic rise in mortality figures and in particular to suicide rates among men. She asserts in her study that the “fixed effects regressions across 22 transition economies indicate that male suicide rates are highly sensitive to the state of the macroeconomy, suggesting that the steep and prolonged declines in GDP in the western countries of the former Soviet Union may have been partly to blame for the suicide epidemic”. Evidence suggests that not all countries in this study showed a marked increase in suicide rates. Rising unemployment rates, massive declines in per capita income, and failed reforms led to this increase in suicide and increase in overall mortality in Russia.

One unique characteristic of Russia and its mortality crisis is its acute changes in life expectancy. The previously discussed anti-alcohol campaign of the 1980’s saw life expectancy rise. Another rise in between 1992-94 and the euphoria brought about by change also saw life expectancies increase. However, the financial crisis brought on by the ruble collapse of 1998 led to dramatic drops in life expectancy. And disturbingly, the continued high suicide rates and low life expectancy particularly among men in Russia during the Putin years. Deaths from acute causes were the greatest negative denominator in these fallen life expectancies. Deaths from cardiovascular disease, homicide, accidents
and in particular suicides played a major role. It is estimated that suicides were responsible for approximately 16% increase in the deaths during the 1990’s alone.

Statistically speaking, Russia’s economy is at a juxtaposition when you consider it’s political and economic power status as a member of the UN Security Council and as a member of the G8. According to the UN, Russia ranks 58th in GDP when looking at Purchasing Power Parity, and 67th in Human Development Index. HDI takes into account the quality of life in a country by looking at four cohorts; life expectancy, literacy rate, years of schooling, and per capita GDP. Based on this ranking, Russia would only be considered a developing country and hardly the economic powerhouse that it portends. The long-term effects of the gas and oil industry on Russia have yet to be analyzed. The current global situation should put Russia in a position to make substantial gains in its overall GDP and improve the quality of life for its citizens. Additional evaluation of this phenomenon should be investigated.

The reality of the macroeconomics of Russia since the fall of communism for the vast majority of Russians is a bleak picture. Rising costs of housing, food, and other basic commodities have risen in the open market. Government subsidies have not kept up with the cost of living. People are no longer able to depend on the government for the basics no matter how meager they may have been. The shutdown of state-run industries put hundreds of thousands of people out of work. People are faced with having to purchase items that were once supplied or subsidized by the state, most notably there apartments. Economic conditions also create changes in the social order.

The higher unemployment rates and drops in purchasing power led to an increase in divorce rates. As Elizabeth Brainerd suggests, divorce rates also appear to add to the likelihood of higher suicide rates. Also, the overall lower life expectancies has left more women living without their husbands and has shown a slight increase in elderly females committing suicide.

Conclusion

For the 143 million people who live in the world’s largest geographic state, they now face an internal enemy that threatens their very existence. Although religious sects, cults, and other threatened groups in history have taken their own lives, no country in history has committed mass suicide. It would be an overstatement to suggest that Russia

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will go the way of the Masada zealots, but the suicide situation in Russia today does suggest a serious and somewhat perplexing problem.

To understand the impact of the many variables that contribute to social conditions requires a broad view. As in the case of Russia and suicide, it is a combination of many factors that have created this situation. A history of authoritarian rule saw periods of depression that undoubtedly had an impact on the psyche of the Russian people. From Tsarist rule to Soviet terror under Stalin, to the comfort of familiarity in the waning days of the USSR, as well as the authoritarian measures of Vladimir Putin at the beginning of the 21st century; this political factor must be considered a serious component of this puzzle.

The overall lifestyle of the Russian people and the inability or unwillingness of the health care system to positively deal with the many crises is critical to understanding the high rates of suicide. The high rate of alcoholism and its social components have dealt Russia a multi-faceted blow to its falling birth rates and rising death rates. A chronic disease found throughout a Russian society has implications for every measurable cohort among deaths. As alcohol becomes more available it has shown a greater number of suicides in Russia. As has been pointed out, the cultural acceptance of drinking and the over all consumption is a big part of the issue. Sadly, binge drinking and high rates of distilled spirits are also major contributors to the crisis.

Other health issues such as the rising rate of drug use and the HIV/AIDS rates in Russia have also conclusively contributed to the alarming suicide rates. This medical issue shows no signs of slowing down and it only seems logical to assume a greater risk of further suicidal behavior. Considering that HIV is considered relatively new in Russia and the government has been slow to acknowledge or react with educational programs does not bode well in the short term. Suicide prevention itself is an issue in Russia that overall has not gotten a great deal of support or acknowledgment from the government. Most campaigns concerning health issues such as this are increasingly handled and dealt with by non-governmental organizations.

Finally, the macroeconomic situation that affects individuals has had a dramatic effect on the consistently high suicide rates in this country. Hope has died hard for a large percentage of the Russian people as the reforms and economic model the
government adapted in the 1990’s first failed. Even with the abundant resources in particular fossil fuels and windfalls of the Putin administration, millions of Russians have seen very little improvement in the quality of life.

Simple and quick solutions do not exist when dealing with a societal problem that has so many contributors. However, I must conclude with a few thoughts on the steps necessary to deal with this menacing national disease. The government of Russia must continue reforms that will make it more transparent and democratic. Without this, the people will continue to feel powerless. Powerlessness no doubt leads to hopelessness. National assets must be seen as a way to improve the quality of life for all Russian citizens and not just an oligarchic few. The government must evaluate and properly fund a healthcare system that is yet a relic of the Soviet era. This includes campaigns and major emphasis on education in regards to alcohol consumption, drug use, sexually transmitted diseases, and mental health. Although there is evidence that some of these problems are being acknowledged, it has been treated far from the national emergency that it is. Again, government transparency and cooperation will provide further help from non-governmental organizations and possible foreign investment. Without this beginning, suicide victims in Russia may just end up being one of Stalin’s statistical million.

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