

This is an abridged version of the book introduction, reprinted from Dale Pesmen: *Russia and Soul: An Exploration*. Copyright © 2000 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

Is soul a thing?

The morning after the Soviet Union's sudden death in December, 1991, a frivolous headline quipped: "I woke up and -- Hello! Soviet Power is no more!" In the military industrial city of Omsk, southwestern Siberia, however, for many ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and others, the Soviet Union's demise was clearly being faked. Life was too tough to waste energy on politics anyway. Many people assumed "They" were fooling around, trying to pull something off, probably getting rich, at "Our" expense. When "They" had gotten what they wanted, the USSR would just as suddenly reappear.

In October 1992 Omsk found itself immersed in an odd anniversary of the Revolution. Stiff, filthy red laundry flew right alongside new red, white, and blue flags, unhealthily metamorphosing into a questionable "democracy." This mess, all this flapping together in the air of wheeling, dealing, and the brave new politic of robbing each other blind, challenged so much that it was hard to take in even *visually*.

People tried to "take it in." When the USSR's passing did not pass, it slowly began to be described by many in terms of injury to *dusha*, soul, and pain in it, in their soul, as negotiating social changes *v dushe*, "in" soul, and *s dushoi*, "with" it. The enigmatic Russian soul is a romantic cliché and moribund commonplace, but that year one woman told me: "Before, when we thought about *dusha*, soul, we were *philosophically* wondering what to do. But now we've started asking it simply, *deeply*. Now we're *really* starting to think about soul." A young businessman said "We've changed a lot. Something's really happened with that -- that *dusha* of ours."

This is one of a handful of non-Soviet ethnographies that focus on Russians during and just after perestroika. I first went to Omsk in 1990, as an interpreter for a theater staging an American musical about a bar on the Florida coast (cool project for a Siberian winter). I made

friends and returned repeatedly to do fieldwork through 1994. I was there both in January 1991 when this "closed" military industrial city quietly "opened," allowing foreigners to obtain visas, and almost a year later when the USSR disbanded. I lived with families in the city and spent time in villages and at dachas.

This is also an ethnography of Russian *soul*. Cliché that it is, much of what is exoticized as the deep Russian soul is widely shared by Americans and Western Europeans. And interestingly, they often relate *soul* to Russia. When cultures have been intimately related, such similarities can be powerful heuristic tools.

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"The conceit of the West deserves our mockery," says a character in a novel by Russian author Alexander Zinoviev (1982:32-3), deriding outside attempts at understanding Russian soul. Talk about *dusha* often corresponds, as Wierzbicka (1992) writes, to what has been called Russian national character. Although Russians often discuss their *own* national character, others' diagnoses of it have been ridiculed since at least Dostoevsky's time. Russian soul is what, in Russian and Soviet books, films, and folklore, idiotically romantic foreigners write about and research. I discuss this derision in several chapters, but for starters I have to say that I think there's something to it. Many of us would resent having our "mentalities" summarized. It also seems uninteresting to *see* people as "having" mentalities. In an effort to think about people more generously, I have tried to pay more attention to the surface of things, to what we *can* see. The more I did this, the more vividly I saw how believing in two of the elements I mention above, *depth* and *centralization*, comes to organize life and meaning.

I think these images are flawed for a number of reasons I discuss. Faced by the fragmentation and incomprehensibility of 1990s Russian time and space, individuals wove images of soul and other highly valued "wholes." Such pictures of rich, vast entities, "infinitely" deep, alive, and meaningful (or allegedly "too" deep and meaningful to express), participate in creative integrations of individuals and groups. But however persuasive, as images of humans they are grossly simplified and thus in somewhat bad faith. What's more, their reliance on vague

gestures in the direction of something huge and authoritative supports size, strength, and power as valuable criteria. The creation of wholes and souls is continuous with how ethnicities and classes and so-called blood ties are discovered, politicized, set up against others, and sometimes taken to the extreme of all that and made violent. Identities created by exaggeration, conflation, and generalization and felt to be authoritatively real are made to be manipulated.

So what can anthropology do about it?

By describing everyday life in a universe in which there was Russian soul, I focus on what I call its *metaphysics*: its explicit and implied elements and workings. I reflect on how souls people described to me were obtained, what was *for* and *against* them, fed and starved them, according to what laws; under what conditions *dusha* was apparent and what made it vanish; *dusha*'s connection to various kinds of *life*; what a person *with* soul could be like; how soul was related to various powers and "other worlds;" its relation to consciousness, and implications of all this for space and time. Ethnography showed that soul was, in early 1990s Russia, invoked and involved in sacred and profane situations that it molded and that modified it. Ethnography helped me examine in great detail some fictions and realities of believing that people "have" reified, centralized life forces. Soul can be seen as what human flexibility and incoherence look like or what they become when molded by belief in a hegemonic model of the center, of depth.

Discourses of *dusha* and other souls claim to describe realities behind or underneath the appearances of everyday signs of the self. The reigning ideology assures us that there *are* "deeper" realities and that it's important for us to reach for them or coax them out. But I would like to question the "implication that there is ... a science of reality behind the appearances ... in addition to the realm of phenomena" (Peirce in Singer 1984:69). What if the signs, shaped by beliefs, are all we have?

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This book examines having a deep, valuable center in order to question these categories. But writing an ethnography about something is very different than attacking it from a philosophical or psychological perspective. Eagleton (1996) has said that Adorno dreamed of

“the dialectical feat of a thought faithful to the opacity of one’s subject matter.” This ethnography tries to take into account how enmeshed we are in and how shaped by “cultural” beliefs.

Parallels between Russian and other “souls” suggest that this ethnography may be a useful tool for critically examining some aspects of our everyday metaphysics. But our flexibility, great as it is, is limited by solidified local habits that theory is unlikely to have arms long enough to get at. What can this sort of questioning be worth?

Although one can’t help but be complicit with these habits, if one becomes convinced that they are, philosophically or aesthetically, not entirely admirable, one may be able to withhold some of the wholeheartedness of one’s collaboration, some of the sense that, since we live by these models, they are the true laws of the universe.

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I must stress that in everyday life many uses of *dusha* did not mean much of anything to the person who said them; “Like hares, they are so like the ground they sit on, that it requires a sharp eye ... to make them out,” as a nameless writer (T.D. 1925:720) said of dead metaphors. Uses of *dusha* could be as invisible as the *hands* in “hands down.” It seems unfair to disturb their privacy. If I sometimes point them out, it’s because like hares, they could jump. This could have happened at any time, but it happened very often in the early 1990s.

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For example, spirit, *dukh*, as in “the spirit of communist ideals,” was well-used during the Soviet era, but Gorbachev began to use it in what he called “the spirit of newness.” In speeches during the eight years before perestroika, I found that he had mentioned *dukhovnyi*, *spiritual*, potential, heritage, interests, needs, culture, and development each about once, and spiritual life twice. Then, *at the 1986 Congress alone*, he used *dukhovnyi* to modify at least *fifteen* nouns, many more than once, emphasizing *dukh*, *dukhovnyi*, and even *dusha* in headings and titles. He prioritized *spiritual transformation*: perestroika of all spheres of life begins with *psychological*

perestroika. Although Gorbachev had referred to “psychological perestroika” since at least 1978, in 1985-6, instead of the odd limp gesture at restructuring one’s attitude to work, he began lavishly offering synonyms, subcategories, being almost analytically specific about how this *perelom* (sharp break or turn) in minds and moods was “one of the hardest perestroikas.” Gorbachev had formerly used *dusha* in canonized expressions for “the bottom of his heart” and for members of the population (*dushi naseleniia*). At the Congress, however, he passionately stated: “It is bad when politicians are blind not only with their *eyes*, but with their *souls*,” and went out of his way to call the essence of a political collaboration its *dusha*.

This renaissance of the term *dusha* was not limited to political rhetoric. Although “Russian soul’s” vitality was supposed to be long gone, many Russians and others spent their openness energetically blaming centuries of leaders (including Gorbachev himself and other engineers of perestroika) and other entities for injuring that precious soul. *Dusha* was said to be dying, murdered by the West, by Soviet and post-Soviet powerful, by attempts at a market economy, by everyday life. Even some “optimists,” new businessmen, and young people agreed something was being lost, although, perhaps, necessarily.

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During the following years, souls of many kinds were actively found, negotiated, reproduced. Part of the ethnographic side of this book shows how, in early 1990s Russia, soul was invoked and involved in sacred and profane situations, ambivalently treated, mocked and revered, how “it” was used to create, manipulate, and exploit cultural capital, during the course of which “it” was itself modified. Again, though, I’m also questioning soul’s “thingness.”

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Trying to say something about the far from fully formed and understood, what Fernandez (1986:236) calls *inchoate*, situation I participated in in Omsk, trying to respectfully discuss what others were living through, I begin with none of the traditional categories for discussing “souls”. In fact, early on I stumbled on the *most* incorrect way to ask about *dusha*, according to which it was a *thing*. This not only masked *dusha*'s (relation to) meaning but had a paralyzing, stupid

generality, like asking an American "What's human psychology?" As a friend said, "The idea of dusha is hard to express with some sort of single definition, as hard as answering 'What's love?'"

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So how to circumvent the trap of asking what soul IS?

One way was to investigate soul as how people did things

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I deal with drinking, steam bathing, and other "souls" that are more what *happen* than what people *have*.

Another way was to focus on *adjectives* people used to describe dusha (like deep, inexplicable, and mysterious), what meaning those adjectives had, and how they had it.

I look at how individuals flexibly manipulate images and practices, adapting them to contingencies and relating them to each other.

...this problem of not wanting to direct my interlocutors to narrowly define dusha or to define it as a *thing* forced me to devise a rather new way of structuring an ethnographic interview.

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I conducted over fifty hours of interviews with individuals between 11 and 75 years of age, 12 female and 14 male. These were workers, craftspeople, teachers and engineers; my village friends worked on a state farm. Most of these people's salaries were less than subsistence-level, and soon even that was often not paid. Some were unemployed; a few worked for private firms. Older people had tiny pensions.

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If in many societies the soul is rarely or never the object of metaphysical discussion (Riviere 1987:426), talk related to dusha was an integral part of it. At what could be night- or afternoon-long sessions at table, a form of intense communication was often an explicit goal. My interviews became analogous to this *sitting*, and if the first responses I got could be stiff or formulaic, the ensuing conversations were usually creative and mutually rewarding. This book is

full of voices of thoughtful people who are, in Nancy Ries' words (personal communication, 1999), "very experienced at being Russian," trying hard to put into their own words, "local theory," if you will, something about how they live in the world. They tried, energetically and in earnest, to formulate for themselves and for me descriptions of their world.

Many people mournfully alleged a decrease in such talk, dated anywhere from the revolution to the present. After interviews some people thanked me, we thanked each other: "We used to talk like this much more." One friend called the talk we had just taped "a great psychological workout." Another man told me, hyperbolically, that if people had talked *like that* more during the Soviet era, many of that time's travesties would have never happened. In other words, if the careful observation and representation that characterizes my friends' statements was sometimes initiated by me, it was not foreign to them. Their exclamations after our "interviews" confirm that, at the least, the activity we had just engaged in had a respected place in their scheme of things. They were also, again, quite good at it.

But if there is no doubt that, for many reasons, Russian soul is discussed more when foreigners are around or in earshot, most media I draw on here were really addressed to Soviets; as I mentioned above, radio, television, newspaper, and magazine discourse and popular literature and nonfiction dealt with *dusha* and spiritual issues with astounding frequency.

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Each chapter presents situations and stories from my notes, from hearsay, and from the media and literature, and introduces people whose words or actions helped me think about these issues. The themes and images that serve as chapter beginnings tend so often to be tropes of each other that, for example, expansiveness, chaos, alcohol, other worlds, centers, and music may carry associations to all of the others in part of what Stites (1992:5-6) calls a "rich interconnection" that allows Soviet audiences to "decode effortlessly the various quotations, allusions, and symbols that recur so frequently." These elements have persisted through styles and movements in art, politics, and everyday life.

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Above I mentioned Eagleton's (1996) paraphrase of Adorno's desire to pull off the dialectical feat of "a thought faithful to the opacity of one's subject matter." Something like this fidelity is what I am talking about. This book's complexity is iconic of the complexity of my object -- the life of soul is at least that complex.

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As I can only say "apparently" and "people said" so many times in an effort to make my own voice stand out from voices in which I am immersing the reader, I want to again stress that the cosmology I am describing is what I *found*. It is, of course, in ways I have no control over, identical to the cosmology I live by, but I am not presenting this picture in a spirit of admiration, only of compassion. Close, detailed ethnography with an emphasis on what people actually did and said they experienced, ethnography that sticks as close as possible to phenomena, is one of my tactics to *question* as seriously and respectfully as possible the reality and morality of depth and centeredness. It's hard to know how to intelligently and respectfully criticize something with which one is complicit. But respect is indispensable, because crude opposition is the dumbest form of collaboration.

Because context is all-important to performances and powers of *dusha*, I have tried to filter out neither anomalies, idiosyncratic events with no statistical significance, ideological tirades delivered for my edification, nor lies. I examine a texture of life that, for those living it, indiscriminately combined elements of many genres, provenances, and derivations.

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This book has six parts, consisting of chapters and short stories. In terms like those my Omsk friends used, each chapter begins with something "in," affecting, "coming out of," or some power of the Russian, Soviet, or post-Soviet *dusha*. Each chapter has its take on soul: situations and activities where *dusha* was important or often mentioned, categories, images and tropes relating to it.

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This book is an ethnography of part of 1990s Russia and part of dusha; it is also a preliminary attempt to poke at some very basic assumptions shared by many people who never call themselves “Russian” but assume they have souls.