

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

**Robin Hessman**  
**Filmmaker in Residence**  
**WGBH Boston**  
**STG 2005-2006**  
**Russia**

## **The Last Soviet Children: Exploring Russia's Generation X**

### **Topic of Research and Countries Visited**

I went to Russia to conduct research towards the production of a documentary film about the last generation of Soviet children to grow up behind the Iron Curtain. Through in-depth portraits of several individuals the film will address in social, cultural, political and economic dimensions some of the issues confronted by the generation (born around 1967-1973) that was just coming of age during Perestroika. Some particular themes of interest are the relationship between the political and the personal, the changing interpretations of Russia's history, (Russia's "unpredictable past") and the level of communication and understanding between this generation and their own young post-Soviet children. The research conducted involved both interviews with potential subjects of the film, as well as research in the visual materials of their childhood in the Soviet 1970s and 1980s from private collections and state archives.

### **Relevance and Contribution to the Field**

There have been few documentary films about Russia's recent significant social transitions and the impact of these changes on the lives of individuals. Polls and surveys and academic studies provide crucial information in gauging attitudes and circumstances in society, but it is also helpful to supplement those forms of information with personal in-depth nuanced portraits which will be available as a resource to students in universities as well as to the public at large through television broadcast. Additionally, the medium of film provides untold opportunities to enhance and illustrate stories and recollections with visual artifacts of the times. As interviewees discuss important memories of their youth, photographs, archival footage, and home movies can provide outsiders immediate access to those experiences on an intuitive as well as intellectual level.

The focus of this film is the specific generation whose childhoods and primary schooling and socialization took place completely during the time of the Soviet Union yet had not begun to enter adult society or the work force. By choosing to profile subjects who were classmates together in a typical Moscow school throughout their childhoods, yet today lead significantly different lives, the study can illuminate some of the factors involved in determining how "successful" members of this generation were in adapting to the changes that confronted them as they were coming of age. As far as potential significance for policy, many members of this generation are now at the forefront of leading business, political, and cultural interactions with America, and with the rest of the world. Having a window on to of some of the concerns, challenges, memories and aspirations of the 30-somethings can serve as a means to understand the broader cultural implications of American policies towards Russia. This film can illuminate the way that Russia's Generation X defines itself within a rising tide of international, historical concerns.

### **Summary of Research Methodology and Sites**

During my weeks in Moscow, I interviewed over thirty subjects at first in informal settings, sometimes with a small consumer digital video camera, and then in a follow up meeting where I filmed and recorded the conversations on a professional DV camera. In some cases I interviewed spouses together and in others, interviewed subjects together with their young children. This information is both helpful as background research to gain a greater understanding of the breadth and variety of views and experiences of this generation, but is also part of a focused search for the individuals whose stories will make up the heart of the film. The interviews are to be transcribed and logged for reference.

As I am particularly interested in questions of views of this generation on their country's recent past, organizations such as Memorial, the Sakharov Foundation, and the Institute of Open Education helped me locate several interview subjects who are history teachers in their 30s and currently teaching in schools in Moscow and in the suburbs. This allowed an interesting perspective on both their personal and professional evaluations of the events of Russia over the past 15 years. It was also valuable to hear their perspectives on their teenage Post- Soviet students.

My second research task was to explore and gather selections of the images that surrounded the Soviet children of the 1970s including cartoons, storybooks, television shows, training films, and feature films. I contacted the Gorky Film Studios for Children and Youth Cinema where I obtained copies of all episodes of the program "Yerolash" from the 1970s. I also spent a great deal of time in The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive (RGAKFD) in Krasnogorsk screening newsreels and documentaries made during the 1970s and 1980s by the studios "Central Studio of Documentary Film" and Center of Scientific Film. Here I was particularly pleased to screen many episodes of the "Young Pioneers" newsreels, as well as some of the "News of the Day" newsreels." I also was able to see films from the 1970s and 1980s produced by the CSDF such as The Future Belongs to Them, March of the Generations, They Will Live in the 21st Century, and "We are Children of the Planet."

The third research task was to locate personal collections of letters, diaries, photographs, and most importantly, 8mm and 16mm home movies from the 1970s and later. This was accomplished through targeted forms of "advertising," signs posted on bulletin boards and through specifically targeted internet sites such as the "76-82" website which has recently evolved from a live journal community. The search was also conducted by word of mouth, and luckily, by an announcement on Ekho Moskvyyi during a three hour broadcast about public broadcasting (which I will explain later in this report.) I borrowed several reels of 8mm home movies to screen and transfer in the US, as well as borrowed and scanned many personal photographs, artifacts, and letters.

### **Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions**

My research for this film is of course a bit broader and less concentrated than what is usually covered by the research of academics working towards a book. I am inquiring into several general themes in the lives of this generation of young Russians and still at the beginning of the process so it is difficult for me to summarize my findings at this point. I need to review the interviews (that were essentially the detailed biographies) as I continue to interview more subjects over the year.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Continuing to collect social histories of the attitudes and beliefs of the last Soviet children and the first Post-Soviet children can provide incredible insights on how individuals adapt to significant societal change, and how belief systems are created and encouraged. I plan to return to Russia to further the search for the subjects of my film. I am also continuing the work in the film and television archives, and for home movies and private collections of letters, diaries, photographs, and other sources. As the attitudes towards concepts like “Democracy” fluctuate, and as nationalism is growing in Russia, it is even more important to try to understand the reasons behind these trends.

### **Recommendations for the US Policy Community**

My recommendations are twofold. First of all it is crucial to continue funding research of scholars and others (including filmmakers who have very few sources for development money) who are closely examining the effects on individuals of the tremendous societal changes of the past 15 years in the former Soviet Union. Secondly, it would be tremendously beneficial if somehow the aid that US organizations provide (both governmental and non-governmental) could be cast in a light so that citizens might see outsider contribution to the development of Russian civil society as not an insidious act driven by a hidden agenda of the US government. Ways to support independent Russian broadcast media without appearing to be influencing content (leading to accusations of Western propaganda) and perhaps supporting the eventual creation of Russian public broadcasting should be examined.