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11

Domestic Involution

*How Women
Organize Survival in
a North Russian City*

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One of the abiding puzzles of Russian life is how to reconcile an unprecedented decline in the economy, year in, year out, with the continual survival of its populations and the absence of social disturbances. Although all figures are disputed, calculations suggest that between 1990 and 1997 the gross domestic product (GDP) and industrial output fell by some 40 percent, and capital investment fell by 75 percent. According to official figures, in 1997, 20.8 percent of the population was living in poverty. Yet at the same time we find neither massive starvation nor strikes and food riots, neither the destruction of society nor its explosion.

Many are simply not surviving: Mortality rates are increasing at all ages. By 1995, the life expectancy of men had fallen dramatically, to 58.6—the level of a century earlier. In comparison, the life expectancy of women had fallen only marginally, to 71.6. The United Nations Human Development Report for Europe and the CIS estimates the human cost of transition at 6 million male lives.¹ Be-

tween 1980 and 1995, the crude death rate increased from 11 to 15 per thousand persons. Heart attacks, cancer, infant mortality, and tuberculosis have taken an increasing toll. With birthrates falling at the same time, the Russian population is shrinking: In 1996 alone, it decreased by 5.2 percent.

Just as one can exaggerate the Russian capacity for survival, so too can one exaggerate the passivity of Russian society. There have been and continue to be outbursts of collective action, episodic demonstrations in Moscow and regional capitals as well as more widespread strikes. In recent years, teachers, miners, air traffic controllers, and municipal workers have struck effectively. But interestingly, these are occupations that still have bargaining power with local or federal governments. For the most part, the industrial workplace—the one place that organized solidarity under the old regime—has been systematically eroded and forced back into defensive postures when it has not actually disappeared. Thus, although there is some mobilization, it is ephemeral, symbolic, and scattered, and certainly not commensurate with the plight that workers face in their everyday lives. In this chapter we describe how families in one northern city make ends meet, and we explore the implications for social stability.

Involution, Strategies, and Assets

A new type of society is appearing in Russia that statistical data cannot disclose. It is a network society that is both resilient and quiescent, that adapts without mobilization. Its origin lies in Soviet society, which is where we must begin our account. The Soviet order was governed by central appropriation and redistribution of goods and services. In this order, the central place for popular self-organization was the workplace. Because the shortage economy² required that production have flexible autonomy, because ideology gave centrality to the interests of the working class, and because so much redistribution of goods in short supply took place through the workplace, that is where the most sustained contestation of socialism took place. It was there that the heavy apparatus of oppression and atomization had to be most effective. The party-state could blot out effervescence in all other public places but could not do so easily in the workplace. Its economic organization continually recreated both dissent and solidarity, even as party, management, and union vigilantly usurped it. Eulogized as the vanguard of society, workers regularly took up the cudgels of immanent critique, challenging the workers' state to realize its claims to efficiency, justice, and equality. And so from time to time workers went beyond skirmishes in the undergrowth, burst their chains, and exploded onto the public scene.

Still, the collapse of the old regime did not come from within the bowels of the economy but from above. Worker mobilization may have been a precipitating factor, at least in the Russian case, but the rot had begun in the higher reaches of the party-state, which could not prolong its ideological pretenses. It imploded from above, along the fault lines of its redistributive structure. Even before economic reforms began in 1992, the realm of redistribution was being conquered

by a host of intermediaries, who in taking their cut of profits began to strangle production. Shock therapy initiated, in rapid succession, the liberalization of prices, so-called privatization, and stabilization. Markets flooded into the vacuum created by the crumbling planning mechanism. *But market expansion came at the expense of production.* The realm of exchange was invaded by traders, bankers, financiers, transportation monopolists, and mafia, all of whom multiplied transaction costs to bring production to its knees. It declined precipitously, leached by these intermediaries and unable to compete with cheap imports. Enterprises defended themselves against the market by retreating into barter chains, inter-enterprise debt, and wage arrears. All the time output fell. We call the process of economic regression in which exchange eats up its own productive base *economic involution*. For the purposes of this chapter, the essential point is that industrial production began to lose its centrality in everyday life both as a locus of solidarity and a source of economic survival. For many of Russia's workers, the fulcrum of economic activity has moved from workplace to family.

If *economic involution* describes how the market dissolved Soviet production, *domestic involution* is the other side of the collapse. It describes families from the working class, cut off from a living wage, focusing more and more economic activity in the household, as they combine old routines into new strategies of domestic production, entering into mutual aid exchanges across households and exploiting opportunities in wider trade.

In our analysis we distinguish between defensive and entrepreneurial strategies of survival. Each strategy has both a productive and a distributive aspect. In the realm of production, defensive households keep their feet planted simultaneously in wage labor, subsistence production, and trade. We call this the *diversification* of the household economy. In the realm of distribution, defensive households exchange resources, money, food, and labor among themselves. We call this the strategy of *sharing*.

At the same time, there are a few families whose response to involution is more proactive than reactive, more entrepreneurial than defensive. Instead of minimizing risk by diversifying their labor activities, some families devoted themselves to one particular activity—trade, petty commodity production (e.g., making garments), or even some form of service (body shop). This is what we call the *concentration* of the household economy. For such a family enterprise to succeed, however, the proceeds must *accumulate* instead of being consumed or redistributed. The goal is to reinvest resources in the focal economic activity. In short, domestic involution can take place either through diversification or through concentration of economic activity, and economic products can be shared or accumulated. Reality rarely exhibits these strategies in their pure form but as mixed and hybrid expressions of the two basic types (see Figure 11.1).

Survival strategies do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by institutions that define rules for deploying assets. If *economic involution* spells the demise of an institutional order in which strategies are narrowly confined, *domestic involution* opens up strategies by relaxing rules and liberating assets. Just think of the multi-

FIGURE 11.1 Dimensions of Domestic Involution

| | <i>Production</i> | <i>Distribution</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Defensive Strategy | Diversification | Sharing |
| Entrepreneurial Strategy | Concentration | Accumulation |

ple uses of the apartment. Before, it was a place of living and entertainment; now it is an asset that can be sold and bought, easily transmitted from generation to generation. It is also a possible workshop; its balcony can be used to rear pigs and chickens; or it can become a source of rent, or a place for storing merchandise. The apartment's multifunctionality reflects the way the market has liberated the deployment of assets. There are four types of assets that are the object of wide-ranging strategies:

- material possessions (apartments, cars, dachas);
- skills (education, professional credentials, physical skills, etc.);
- social networks (the network of relatives and friends to which individuals or households can appeal for help or to which they are obligated);
- citizenship assets (claims that can be made on the state for pensions, child support, public assistance, rent subsidies).

We use this framework of involution, strategies, and assets to explore the complexity, heterogeneity, and path-dependence of survival in contemporary Russia. Throughout we underline the ways in which involution has both compelled and facilitated inventive appropriations, mobilizations, and combinations of resources, leading in most cases toward defensive strategies, and in a few, toward entrepreneurship.

From Workplace to Household

Our discussion so far has been more conceptual than historical. Strategies, however, cannot be understood outside the specific context of their enactment. However weak, there is still an institutional environment to be negotiated, and rules to be followed. The resources available are sensitive to broad context as well as to individual biography. It is one thing to survive in the tundra, another in the taiga, and quite another in the balmy climes around the Black Sea. It is important, therefore, to put flesh on the bones of economic and domestic involution—to draw out the terrain on which our twelve cases are enacted.

Our first proviso is that the shift from workplace to household, from wage labor to family labor, is rarely exclusive; generally, a balance is struck between the two realms of economic activity. To explore this changing balance, to contrast in-

dustrial with domestic involution, we chose to follow the fate of workers from two factories in Syktyvkar, capital of the Komi Republic.

The Komi Republic is a northerly republic of Russia, lying to the west of the Urals and stretching all the way to the Arctic Circle. It is the size of California, and has a population of 1.2 million. Long dominated by the gulag, its economy is based on the extraction of natural resources: oil, coal, timber, and small quantities of gas and bauxite. Syktyvkar sprang up in the 1930s as an administrative center for the archipelago of labor camps that stretched across the region. It has received successive waves of *forced migration*: the first, following the expulsion of kulaks from the rural hinterland; the second made up of ethnic Germans and Ukrainian partisans deported from the western borderlands during and after World War II; the third, of war prisoners—both returning Russians and captured Germans. Even more important was the *voluntary migration* of Russians from areas devastated by the war, and of those escaping the repressive order of collectivization. Since Soviet times there has been a continuous flow of people and resources between town and country, between Syktyvkar and rural Komi. Migrants came to the area from all over Russia, seeking the higher wages offered by the state for labor in the northern territories. Komi—especially its three major cities (Syktyvkar, Ukhta, and Vorkuta)—became the home of polyglot communities, with various national and ethnic groups living cheek by jowl. On the demand side, Syktyvkar's economy expanded rapidly around its wood-processing industries—its huge paper mill built in the 1960s, and allied industries—and then as a major administrative and educational center. Today it has a population of a quarter million.

In many ways, the two factories we have focused on—the city's garment factory and its furniture factory—are a study in contrasts. Under the old regime the garment factory, Red October, employed 650 workers, 90 percent of them women, often recent arrivals from the rural areas.³ Workers could make up for the low basic wages with bonuses they achieved on the basis of their work performance and productivity (e.g., piecework bonuses). Red October's workers remember the factory fondly, especially the esprit de corps of its labor collective. Intense social activity centered around the work brigades—outings, celebrations, and much sharing of trials and tribulations. This was a home away from home.

The furniture factory, Polar, was a much newer enterprise, employing some 1,300 workers in its main division. Newly constituted out of a small workshop in 1982, it was housed in a single-story modern building and boasted a highly paid, young labor collective of both men and women (albeit strictly segregated occupationally by gender). It manufactured wall systems—an essential piece of furniture for all Soviet apartments. Being much newer and composed of younger workers, the Polar labor collective was not as solidary as that of Red October. There was also more competition for the jobs at Polar, because pay and fringe benefits (access to housing, dachas, kindergartens, holiday camps, and the like) were better.

Both enterprises were privatized in 1992, becoming the property of their own labor collectives, after which their economic fortunes rapidly declined. Polar's decline was particularly steep and marked, since it had been one of the most prosperous factories in the city. It was declared bankrupt and liquidated in 1998—a rare occurrence even today. Red October, meanwhile, continues to eke out an existence. Many of its machines have been sold, one floor has been bought, and another has been rented out. Two floors still house its own production facilities, and a third is occupied by the administration. About 150 workers are employed intermittently by Red October, receiving wages in the form of the garments that they produce. In this chapter we explore what has happened to employees we first interviewed in 1994 and 1995. We argue that decisions they made in those years set them on a path from which they have found it difficult to deviate.

As an aid to understanding the context, we have included a short appendix that describes some of the economic changes that have taken place in recent years—changes in wages, levels of employment, and the official poverty line. These data help us understand the real and symbolic value of the ruble at different times.⁴ We also describe the types of public assistance (pensions, unemployment, and subsidies for low-income families, aid to single mothers, and so on) that often figure prominently in family strategies.

We began this project in 1994, focusing on what was happening to the workers at Polar, an enterprise we had first studied in 1991. In the twilight of communism, Polar effectively exploited its monopoly over wall system production, its easy access to raw materials, and its cozy relationship with the regional timber conglomerate. Economic reforms plunged the factory into a precipitous decline, and by the end of 1993, workers were already leaving in droves. We interviewed some of them, drawing names randomly from the enterprise register of employees. The interviews were open-ended, designed precisely to reveal the various strategies of survival that they deployed. They were all conducted by Tatyana Lytkina—often accompanied by Michael Burawoy. Lytkina's techniques of relentless probing gradually revealed the complex and multilayered realities of workers' economic lives: the multiple sources of earned revenue (wage labor, second jobs, work on the side, self-employment), and the diverse patterns of exchange between households (between relatives, neighbors, friends, and coworkers). She carried a set of interview guidelines in her head, but took along no questionnaire, no tape recorder, no pen and paper. She wrote up these interviews immediately after they took place.

In 1994 and 1995, Lytkina carried out 48 interviews with Polar employees; and in 1995 and 1996, we decided to extend the study to Red October, where she conducted a further 23 interviews. But in the latter case we did not gain access to the enterprise's list of employees, and we had to develop a snowball sample. We cannot claim that this sample is representative: At the time of our first interviews with them, 21 (44 percent) of our Polar respondents still worked at the furniture factory, whereas only six (26 percent) of Red October respondents were still employed at their facility. The garment workers were interviewed on average a year

later than the furniture workers and therefore were less likely to be still working, as their enterprise was in a progressive decline. Our research strategy, therefore, was not focused on securing representativeness but on elucidating the intricacy of each individual case, with its own diachronic rhythm and specific context. From the 71 interviews, we selected 16 on the basis of their diversity, and we then interviewed these individuals a second time (in certain cases, a third and fourth time). For this chapter, we chose five of these 16 to represent the range of defensive strategies, and four to represent entrepreneurial strategies.

Since economic activity has been forced back into the household as the unit of production and reproduction, we turned to women as our interviewees. Whether due to their inherited homemaking skills or because of their devotion to their children, the burden of family survival is borne by women. As interviewees, they were more willing to talk about and better acquainted with household strategies. Exceptions notwithstanding, men have become increasingly redundant and demoralized, playing a secondary role in the family, and therefore are less informative about the workings of the household. If the changes in their life expectancy are anything to go by, working-class men have suffered more than women from economic involution. Their career possibilities have often shrunk more rapidly than those of women, most of whom occupied jobs in retail sales, banking, human services, and other sectors closer to the realm of exchange, where wages are higher and more likely to be paid.

The inheritors of the Soviet working class are enmeshed in a network society whose scattered nodes are female-dominated families, nuclei around which their husbands and other kin orbit. These demoralized men and struggling women whose goal is immediate survival do not attempt mass mobilization. Instead they draw on the elastic social networks, the resources and strategies, that remain sedimented in the working-class households of today—the legacies of the Soviet regime.

Defensive Strategies

We defined defensive strategies as the combination of diversification of economic activities within the household with the sharing of resources across households. By identifying the key assets that each family deploys, we can see how diversification and redistribution work. Each family tries to keep its foot in the labor market, having at least one member who is employed even if she or he receives no regular wage or only a minuscule one. Each family receives some government assistance, whether in the form of a pension (for disability, old age, or military service), unemployment benefits, or low-income family supplements. Of the five cases, one actively exploits a dacha; a second has a dacha but does not have the resources to grow much there; and a third has a plot of land. The other two are reliant on small but more important exchanges with kin in rural areas. Housing conditions run the gamut from a dilapidated, condemned cottage to a modern three-room apartment received as part of the Soviet government's dispensation

for large families. Because economic involution has brought the loss of many jobs, workers continue to seek an outlet for their skills in occasional jobs or work on the side.

Marina: For a Roof over One's Head⁵

The stereotypic Soviet citizen often has been described as dependent, bereft of initiative, passive in the face of adversity, helpless without state handouts, and jealous of those who enrich themselves. At first sight, Marina looked as though she fit the stereotype. When we interviewed her in 1995, she was still working at Polar, hanging on in the hope of early retirement (at the age of 45), to which she would be entitled on the basis of her hazardous work. But she was denied this because her registered job classification was not designated as hazardous. Still she didn't leave—even though by 1995, wages had been irregular and falling for two years and most workers had already left. She complained a lot about all the stealing that was taking place at the enterprise, both by workers and by managers. She recently had turned down a job in retail, since such work—so she said—was immoral.

At the age of 47, in February 1998, Marina was laid off. She received 1,500 rubles in kind (a divan), half of the six months' liquidation wages owed her by law. At the time of our second interview (April 1999), she was still waiting for the remaining 1,500 rubles. When the six months were up, she registered at the Employment Agency in search of work but so far had found none. "Who wants to employ a pensioner," she says, "when there are so many young people looking for work?" So she depends on monthly unemployment compensation of 375 rubles (75 percent of her regular wages—the amount provided for by law, for the first three months of unemployment) in food, and another 310 rubles in medical assistance for her son, who has chronic asthma and gastritis.

Marina lives with her second husband, who also worked at Polar until wages became irregular. He quit in 1993 for a construction company job, which also failed to meet his expectations, after which he took a job caring for the Municipal Parks. Again he didn't last six months before turning to unemployment. That was in 1994. Now he is working for the Ministry of Internal Affairs as a joiner. He receives 300 rubles a month, more or less regularly, but again only in kind—a bus pass, food. The latest insult was 100 rubles worth of so-called Humanitarian Aid, which was, as Marina described it, only fit for their dogs. He used to do odd jobs on dachas, building stairs or bathhouses, but as Marina asked rhetorically, "Who has the money to pay for such work nowadays?"

Marina and her husband have two children, a daughter of 16 and a son of 15. Marina frequently mentions her son's disability, which often keeps him out of school. She is proud of her daughter's outstanding academic accomplishments and is hoping that through connections she may somehow go on to the university. These accomplishments are all the more amazing, given their deplorable housing conditions. The four of them live in one room of a ramshackle, frame

cottage; Marina's sister, who receives the minimum unemployment benefit of 130 rubles,⁶ lives with her young daughter in a smaller, adjoining room. It is difficult to comprehend how the six of them can exist together in this tiny, dark, dank space.⁷ They heat their room with a small stove, carry water from an outside well, and use an outhouse.

Marina and her first husband inherited this cottage—originally, a duplex—from its owner. When they divorced, they split it equally. Her ex-husband sold his half, which lies abandoned and demolished; but Marina and her family refuse to evacuate the other half. The land has been granted to a developer who is eager to erect a new apartment building on this prime real estate near the center of town. But Marina won't budge. By law her cottage cannot be demolished until all registered there have been rehoused. At the time of the first interview, she had already turned down a modern two-room apartment, holding out for the three rooms to which she was entitled. Since then she has been offered a two-room apartment in a frame building, and most recently, space in a hostel. As the offerings of the city council have become less attractive, she has become all the more determined to hold out for her three-room fantasy, knowing that until she gets her way, she is denying some private developer sumptuous profits.

Their only other source of sustenance is their dacha, bought some 15 years ago, soon after they married. Until 1992, they used to raise chickens and pigs there, but they stopped because they didn't have the money for feed. At the first interview, they were still growing vegetables at the dacha; but by the second interview, Marina was complaining that almost everything they grew was stolen. In the realm of dacha production, as in their income and their housing conditions, their life has progressively deteriorated.

Marina considers herself a troublemaker. At Polar she protested against the ubiquitous stealing as well as her job classification. She has waged a protracted war against the municipality for many years, in the vain hope of improving her deplorable housing circumstances. Bereft of material and skill assets inherited from the past, cut off from any redistributive networks, she is reliant on the state for the little income she receives. But she is hardly passive.

Tanya: Working the Kinship Network⁸

While Marina plays her citizenship assets—unemployment benefits, sick benefits, and housing rights—for all they are worth, Tanya works on her social assets, her diverse kin networks, to keep herself afloat.

Tanya is effectively a single mother. At the age of 44, she shares a one-and-a-half-room apartment in a frame building with her daughter (20) and son (23). At the time of the first interview (1995), she still worked at Red October, but only intermittently because of her asthma and weak heart. Her pay, 200 rubles a month, was about half that of her coworkers; and during the previous year she had seen only 70 rubles a month in cash, having received the rest in kind, at the factory shop. She finally left her job in 1997 because of poor health. She now lives on her

disability pension of 400 rubles. She used to do some sewing on the side, but stopped, fearing that the tax inspectors would discover this activity and take away her pension.

Tanya's first husband died by drowning. She shed no tears over it, since he was an inveterate drinker and used to beat her. Her second husband was Bulgarian, a member of Komi's Bulgarian colony.⁹ When communism ended, he returned home to Bulgaria, and soon began to send Tanya money. She had even spent six months with him there. At the time of the first interview, she wanted to join him permanently with her daughter; later, she wanted to divorce him. Her life was in Komi, with her two children.

Tanya's son was wounded while serving in Chechnya. At the time of the first interview, he had recently returned, a changed person from the gentle boy she knew. When his drinking sprees made him abusive and violent, his sister and mother had to leave the apartment. He had been irregularly employed as an electrician but he rarely saw any wages. Three years later, with tears welling in her eyes, she told us that a year earlier he'd been imprisoned for petty crimes. Tanya's daughter, in contrast—even though she too had found no permanent work—brought smiles to her face. The daughter was about to deliver a baby. Its father was a policeman with no desire to marry her. They hoped he would at least pay child support.

So how does Tanya get by? Her parents in the village nearby help with food (vegetables and sometimes meat). Her mother can sometimes offer her money, since she runs a successful practice in homeopathic medicine. Tanya's eldest sister also helps her with clothes, and in an emergency, with money. As a social worker she doesn't earn much, but her husband had a lucrative job as plumber in a meat processing plant, until he had a heart attack and died the previous year, at 48. Tanya's other sister, also older than her, used to work at Red October but is now employed at a kindergarten. She can't help Tanya materially, but they have always shared their sorrows and delights.

Since the first interview, Tanya's relationship with her mother-in-law by her first marriage had taken a new turn. As grandmother to Tanya's children, she had always helped out in small ways. She was of German descent, and like so many of Komi's ethnic Germans, she had reconnected with her kin. She was now living with her brother in Berlin but continued to visit Komi, as she was employed in German automobile export. She proposed that Tanya marry her other son, the younger brother of Tanya's first husband, and that together with her daughter they move to Berlin. Tanya smiles whimsically at the thought, concluding once more that her future is here in Syktyvkar, close to her own family.

Tanya is not working. Having inherited little from the past other than her sickness, she gets by on minimal support from the state and assistance from her close-knit family (parents, sisters, and mother-in-law). She is the center and beneficiary of a redistributive kinship network. Resignation mixes with the fantasy of escape, as she contemplates her future; but the security of family ties wins the day.

*Sveta: The Single Mother*¹⁰

Tanya became a single mother, but not through her own choice—her first husband drowned and her second emigrated; but Sveta had made this a deliberate life decision. One might be surprised to discover “single mother” as a life strategy, especially as in Soviet times it was such a stigmatized status. As men become more of an economic liability, and as the distribution of public housing to families has virtually ceased, Sveta's strategy has become more acceptable and more common.

Sveta, now 37 years old, began her working life in the village as part of a construction brigade, and then retrained in a vocational college for garment workers. Upon graduating in 1985 she took up a job as a skilled “cutter” at Red October. When she began work at Red October, Sveta received a place in one of its hostels—one of the better ones in Syktyvkar, with a real community of women who worked and lived together. She roomed with two other single workers. It was in 1989 that Sveta and her two roommates collectively decided to become pregnant together. They each had a baby the following year, and in that ingenious way each obtained a separate room.

Sveta took maternity leave in 1990. She was recalled in 1992 because they so desperately needed her skills. But by the time we interviewed her in 1995, her situation had deteriorated. In the prior six months, she had received only an advance of 70 rubles out of her official wage of 320 rubles a month. She took the rest of her wages in kind, from limited offerings at the enterprise shop. As a single mother she received a little assistance from the state (78 rubles). In 1995, she was also working part-time with a friend, sewing nightgowns and men's underpants, and selling the garments through various shops in the city. But this did not bring in much (between 100 rubles and 250 rubles a month).

When we visited her again, in 1999, she said she had given up her job at Red October the previous year. But before quitting she had begun working a second job, as a cleaner in the telecommunications monopoly. Now it had become her main job. The pay was not bad, at 800 rubles a month. Until recently, she had received it in cash and regularly, but now she saw only 500 rubles a month. If worse came to worst and she was laid off, she was prepared to return to the construction sites where she had begun. Sveta had given up the idea of sewing garments on the side, as she no longer had access to machines, and more importantly, her skills were too limited to be competitive. Since her cleaning job only took up two hours a day (six days a week), she wished she had a dacha or even just a garden plot to grow food. But she never had the opportunity to obtain one, as Red October was too poor to give them out to its employees.

Sveta admitted that without help from her two brothers in the village, in the form of vegetables, meat, and eggs, she didn't know how she would survive. She regretted she couldn't help them more in return; but recently she agreed to share her room with her nephew, who is attending one of Syktyvkar's vocational colleges. Although the village is only three hours away by bus, travel is too expensive

to go there often. Still, Sveta always goes in spring, to help with planting potatoes, and she takes her eight-year-old daughter there to stay a while during the summer holidays. The exchange with her native village has become more intensive as her situation has become more precarious.

Sveta is adept at exploiting her rights of access to state assistance. As the head of a low-income family, she obtains free meals for her daughter as well as a maintenance subsidy, paying only 44 rubles instead of 120 rubles for their room. In addition, as a single mother, she is entitled to another 140 rubles a month; but it's been a year since she last received it.

The two skills Sveta inherited from the old regime—sewing and construction—are of little use to her now. The one asset she has managed to claim from the old regime is her room in the hostel. She cannot diversify her economic activities, and so she makes the most of her close relationships with her brothers as well as her status as a single mother. Her decision to become a single mother, her departure for the cleaning job, and her willingness to find alternative work bespeak Sveta's energy and determination to make ends meet.

Natasha: The Two-Earner Household¹¹

When we first interviewed Natasha in 1995, both she and her husband were receiving unemployment compensation, at 75 percent of their wages. Today, unemployment compensation is set at the so-called minimum wage of 87 rubles a month, except for those who lose their jobs through liquidation or restructuring. Any job would pay better than that, so we were not surprised to learn at our second interview that Natasha had found herself new employment.

Natasha began her work career in 1970, at the age of 16, in what was then a small furniture shop and later became the modern factory of Polar. She worked there 24 years. When wages became irregular and work stoppages more frequent, in 1994, she quit her job. As a worker in the hazardous lacquer shop, she might have retired if she had stayed another four years; but instead, she opted for unemployment compensation for two months, and then found a temporary job as a painter, through her husband's sister. When this job ended, she again was left unemployed. Her husband, 43 years old, had worked as a carpenter in a local construction company until pay became irregular, whereupon he too left his job for one in the municipality—thanks, again, to his sister. Like his wife, he only lasted a few months before returning to the construction industry. Again pay became so irregular that he left for unemployment, which together with his disability pension came to 500 rubles. At the time of the first interview they were both on unemployment, bringing in less than 1,000 rubles for a family of four—themselves and their 11-year-old twin daughters. Their income, therefore, was on a par with the poorest of our respondents; but their living conditions, as we shall see, were much better.

Their elder son, age 23, was living in a room in a hostel with his wife and child. He worked as a chauffeur for an enterprise director, which meant that he could

use the car for private purposes. Natasha's daughter, age 21, used to work at Red October, and was living with her family in a two-room apartment (inherited from her husband's parents). Natasha would like to help her daughter but she can't even afford to feed, clothe, and buy school supplies for her two younger girls. The only plus in her circumstances is the modern, three-room apartment she received through the municipal queue for large families. They have a plot of land where they grow potatoes, but they have no dacha. They sometimes take the children to Natasha's parents' village, where Natasha grows some food, and where her 74-year-old mother helps by knitting clothes for them.

When we returned in July 1997, both husband and wife were employed: she, as a cook in a canteen, and he, with the Municipal Parks. She received a low wage of 350 rubles, with an occasional bonus of 100 or 150 rubles. His wage was much higher, at 800 rubles, but he rarely saw more than 200 rubles, with some of the difference being made up in food. Natasha said they were much better off on unemployment, but when that ran out they had to find jobs. They were desperately short of cash to pay for their children's needs.

We interviewed Natasha again in May 1999 and discovered that they were still in the same jobs. She was earning wages and bonuses of between 600 and 800 rubles a month as well as subsidized meals. He was still receiving between 800 and 1,000 rubles, on paper. Wages were usually paid in kind (food and housing maintenance). But in summer there was work on the side, which could bring in 50 rubles a day, plus a meal. On top of this her husband was receiving a disability pension of 300 rubles a month. They were still having difficulty making ends meet, and Natasha was making plans for her teenage daughters to go to technical college, where they would learn catering.

In comparison with the first three interviewees, Natasha had inherited more from the old regime. She had an extensive network of kin in town and country as well as a modern, three-room apartment. At the time of the second interview, Natasha's son was trying to exchange the three-room apartment for a two-room apartment for his parents and a separate, single-room apartment for his family. He hoped to then combine this with his hostel room in order to obtain a two-room apartment. But the plan came to naught. Even a seemingly nonfungible asset such as an apartment can be traded in and the proceeds distributed among family members. Although she appears to be better off than Marina, Tanya, and Sveta, Natasha and her husband struggle daily to meet their family's basic needs.

Irina: Working Pensioners¹²

Conventionally, pensioners are the most dependent and deprived group in society, and thus the most vulnerable to economic decline. One of the paradoxical consequences of economic involution is the relative prosperity of pensioners—at least, where the government distributes pensions on time and in cash, as it does in Komi. After they retire—men at 55 and women at 50—they often continue to work as cleaners, guards, or dishwashers, or in other menial jobs. If they econo-

mize, they can live on less than their pensions and accumulate or redistribute the rest. Thus, it is more common for pensioners to help their children than vice versa.

Irina is 67 years old. She worked at Red October for 35 years and had been chair of its Sports Club and its Trade Union Committee. She retired in 1987 with the honorific title of “personal pensioner,” usually bestowed upon high party officials but sometimes on workers with distinguished careers. The title used to be accompanied by privileges such as free travel in the Komi Republic, trips to holiday resorts, and the like.

Irina lives with her second husband in a two-room apartment that he received through his workplace, having given her own apartment to her 33-year-old daughter and family. Her 35-year-old, married son also has his own apartment, where he lives with his wife and son. Irina and her husband don’t receive any help from either of her children. She receives 360 rubles a month as her pension. Until 1998, she was earning a similar, additional amount as a dishwasher and cleaner at a local restaurant; but after years working there as a pensioner, she had decided that enough was enough.

Her husband receives a similar pension, plus a war veteran supplement, which together come to 500 rubles. In addition, he works as a night guard and yard cleaner at Syktyvkar Road Works. He is supposed to get 800 rubles a month for this, but he’s lucky if he sees 200 rubles. He is owed 5,000 rubles in back pay. As Irina proudly announces, he is the breadwinner, paying for the apartment (electricity and maintenance) and for basic necessities such as food. “He feeds me,” she says, “so why should I continue to work?” But she quickly adds, “I’ve never taken a single kopeck from him.”

She has her own bank account, which she draws on liberally to help her children—especially her son, an electrician in the same company as his father, and his wife, who is a saleswoman. Neither of them receive their wages on a regular basis. In the space of the three years between the two interviews, Irina had given her son 8,000 rubles for a car, 5,000 rubles for a garage (also used as a pantry for her dacha produce), and 3,000 rubles to her grandson for his studies. She had received 4,000 rubles as an inheritance from an uncle, and the rest of the 12,000 rubles she had saved from her own earnings.

Not content to sit idle, both are also very active at their dacha, which they bought in 1973, initially sharing it with Irina’s sister. Although it is not big—only 500 square meters—they are able to grow all varieties of vegetables and berries there, which they supplement with mushrooms that they collect in the forest and cabbage that they get from the state farm. The food gets them through the winter. With produce from the dacha, they can also help both their children economize. Irina and her husband have diversified their activities in multiple realms, and distribute what they can to their children.

Because wages in money are scarce and pensions are paid regularly, retirees seem to be almost like a labor aristocracy, free of immediate obligations yet with a monetary base from which to pursue other sources of livelihood. They can be judicious distributors of their time, their resources, and their income.

It is difficult to summarize these cases. All five households are struggling to keep their heads above the rising waters of economic involution by various methods. There is a correspondence, albeit a loose one, between the resources inherited from the old regime and strategies deployed in the new regime. It is better to think of these assets not so much as wielded instrumentally but as a field that shapes the parameters of strategies. As wage labor collapses, households are thrown back on their various material, social, and citizenship assets; the formal skills they acquired under the old regime are no longer of much use. Their defensive strategies, formed in 1994 and 1995, turned out to be amazingly stable despite the uncertain environment. A few households were more ambitious: Instead of diversifying their economic activities, they collectively concentrated their energies on one pursuit; instead of sharing across households, they attempted to accumulate resources—that is, not only to spend but also to invest. These were the aspiring entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial Strategies

The household strategies we have explored so far have attempted to spread risk over state assistance, household sharing, and labor diversification. However, we found a few households swimming out to sea with the involutorial tide, concentrating on a single economic activity. According to involution theory, the most dynamic part of the Russian economy is in the realm of exchange; and that is what the four exceptional women whose stories follow have managed to exploit. Investing their energies in trade and petty commodity production was not something that they inherited from the past but something they developed themselves, often driven to this entrepreneurial strategy by desperate circumstances rather than disposition or desire. The narratives that follow highlight the dilemmas and risks of concentration and accumulation, explaining why some still cling to their wage labor as a form of security despite nonpayment of wages. At the same time, there is more instability and risk-taking in the life choices of the four women we discuss below, involving switches between defensive and entrepreneurial strategies. The first two women had been employed by Red October. Nina continued to work there, but she was paid in kind; she had to become an entrepreneur in order to realize a sufficient monetary income. Anna left Red October for a cleaning job but developed a dressmaking business at home. The second two women were employed at Polar, and they have been more successful. Luba has moved from one retail store to another, and Valya has created her own business in the local market. Among our interviewees, only Valya survives on self-employment without any wage labor.

*Nina: Trade on the Side*¹³

As mentioned earlier, the transition to the market brought wide-ranging opportunities in the sphere of exchange, from high finance to petty trade. Indeed, in the

early years of the transition, Russia looked more like a flea market than a free market. Women in particular, but also teenage boys growing up in this period, were often drawn to commercial activities and the cash nexus. Our first case of entrepreneurship describes such "trade on the side"—first, on the part of the son, and then on that of the mother.

Nina is 47 years old, married, with two sons. She was recommended to us as a very popular supervisor at Red October. At the time of our first interview, in 1995, she was officially earning 400 rubles a month but saw only 70 of those in cash, receiving the rest in goods from the factory shop. Her husband did better. As a carpenter in a large grocery store, he was earning 1,000 rubles; but his wages, which he received in cash, were also being held up.

The two of them lived together with their younger son in a two-room apartment that they received from the municipality when their timber cottage was demolished. At the time of the first interview, the younger son, then 13 years old, had already embarked on an entrepreneurial career. He had begun by selling newspapers, moved on to toilet paper, and from there turned to wicker baskets. He was providing for his own monetary needs and even loaning his mother money when she was short. These precocious business activities evoked great consternation in his father, who thought his son should concentrate on his education. His mother, who had had socialist leanings all her life and was therefore ambivalent about all commercial operations, nevertheless showed a furtive pride in her younger boy, who was already helping his family.

Indeed, he helped her pay off her debts from a trip to Chechnya with the Soldiers' Mothers to look for her elder son.¹⁴ Although suffering from the aftereffects of the war, Nina's elder son was by no means as badly off as Tanya's. Today he is an electrician, working in a commercial enterprise and living with his wife and one-year-old daughter in the apartment of his mother-in-law, who has moved out to stay with her lover.

When we returned in April 1999 to talk to Nina, we discovered that she was still working at Red October and her husband was still at the grocery store. She had not seen any alternative to staying on. She didn't want to join the army of cleaning people, ex-employees of Red October, that had occupied the city's office buildings. In any case, she would be retiring in three years and receiving a pension.

Nina described the situation at Red October as follows: There were still 150 workers there, laboring under work stoppages and irregular and pitiful payment. The month before, she had worked only nine days. With some amusement, she described her work brigade of 20 as including 10 disabled workers, three pensioners, and three who were about to retire. The piecework system existed as before, but wages were no longer paid in money but in the bras, nightgowns, and shirts they produced. Most of her coworkers were unhappy about this system, since they found the garments difficult to sell. To their complaints, management replied to the effect that they could like it or lump it. Nina, however, seemed to thrive on the system. She had been so successful at peddling her wares at enter-

prises and organizations around the city that she owed Red October more than it owed her. In effect, she had become a small-scale trader, selling garments that she had paid for with work hours instead of cash. Her earnings were officially 500 rubles a month, but with this petty trade, we suspected that they were much greater.

Whereas Nina had entered trade on the side, her younger son, now 17 years old, had given it up. His commercial activities led nowhere, providing him pocket money and the ability to assist his mother from time to time, but not an entrepreneurial career. He was embarrassed to continue with them, but it was too late to catch up on his schoolwork. His teachers suggested he enter a vocational college in ninth grade instead of continuing with high school. So he entered the college for construction workers. Nina now regrets that she encouraged his commercial operations, and worries about his future.

Apart from their wage labor and trade, Nina and her family were actively cultivating their dacha garden, which supplied two families—her own and her elder son's—with food through the winter. Her elder son and his family planned to spend the entire summer at the dacha that year, saving on the costs of traveling to and fro. Nina was close to her sister, from whom she used to borrow money in exchange for sewing dresses and nightgowns. But now it seemed she was not so short of cash; she was able to buy clothes for her younger son, and the previous year, even a television set. They weren't stinting on food, and she even had some left over, to help out her elder son from time to time.

Nina was running an active, diversified household economy based on two wage incomes, trade on the side, and dacha cultivation. Her situation had actually improved over the last five years: Her husband was still bringing in cash, and she had given her own job an entrepreneurial twist. She had begun to share her gains with her kin. The one major cost she regretted was the sacrifice of her younger son's education.

Anna: Between Wage Labor and Self-Employment¹⁵

Nina's is a transitional case: Her job compelled her to become a trader in order to realize a monetary wage. Anna's is the more usual case, of formal employment supplemented by work at home, exploiting skills acquired at Red October.

Anna was born in Syktyvkar, in 1964. After graduating from high school, she was immediately hired by Red October. Her mother, who was employed at Polar, had wanted her to go on to technical college, but Anna had already made up her mind otherwise. Anna took to Red October like a duck to water, rapidly moving up the skill hierarchy. They produced men's shirts by the piecework system. She brought home what was then the very handsome wage of 350 rubles. She would often work weekends.

She was very active in the social life of the factory, organizing tea parties, outings, collective holidays, and the like. She became a Komsomol leader, then a deputy in the City Council (1984–1987), a member of the Regional Council of

Trade Unions, and finally, a member of the Communist party in 1986, which she quit shortly thereafter, in 1989.

In 1987 she married a man who had come to the factory from the village. At one point, she even returned with him to live in the village, dreaming of owning a house and orchard there. But that was not to be. Two months later, under pressure from her mother, they returned to the city and Anna rejoined her old brigade at Red October. She took maternity leave in 1988 and again in 1991. In 1992, the enterprise was privatized to the work collective, but that event had little immediate effect on her life. In 1993, a new shop for military uniforms was opened; but soon afterward, the enterprise began to go downhill. The first work stoppages occurred in 1993, and for the first time she began to worry about her future. At the end of 1993, wage payment delays began, initially only for a few weeks. In 1994, the work stoppages became longer and longer, and in summer her department was closed for two months. The same thing happened in 1995. She quit work in July 1995.

It was not easy to leave Red October and her brigade, but there was no future in it. Managers had started to steal equipment, workers had begun to leave, and the brigades were merged and reduced in size. In 1996, after she had left, she recounted the sad story of rising debts and long delays in wages. The best workers had left, and Red October was forced to hire people without any skills, straight off the street. The only people who wanted to work there came from the unemployment office. They would work for a few months and then go back on unemployment, she said.

Before she left, Anna had taken on an extra job as a janitor at the Telecommunications Center. She had got the job through a friend. When it became clear that she would have to formally register this new job as her primary employment or lose it altogether, she left Red October, thinking she was moving into a more stable situation. She received 400 rubles a month. This was a low salary, but at least she was paid regularly and in cash. She was earning as much as at Red October and had more free time. What had once been a sideline had become her main job.

As soon as she left Red October, however, she began sewing garments at home. The first hurdle was to buy a sewing machine. Her husband opposed this enormous expenditure, but she overruled him. At the beginning of 1996, she began to take in orders, expedited by her neighbor who worked at a local tailor's *artel* and who was able to redirect work to Anna. Her first contract was to sew diapers for the city's maternity home. Then she began to take orders from other neighbors and friends. With the help of the same neighbor she worked out effective prices—about half the factory price—and then diversified her offerings from dresses and nightgowns to coats and suits. Since few people could pay in cash for their purchases, Anna also accepted payments in kind.

At first (in 1996), this extra work brought in much less than her "main job" as a cleaning person; but by the end of 1998, the situation was reversed. On the one side, orders continued to grow, and it became hard for her to fulfill them. On the other side, her wages at the Telecommunications Center became irregular, and

her advance was lowered to a mere 60 rubles. Later there were layoffs, but she miraculously escaped them, and at the time of our last interview (April 1999), she was earning 400 rubles, paid regularly each month. Her working hours were from 5 P.M. to 10 P.M., six days a week; and although she was up to her neck in dirty rags, she couldn't give it up because her dressmaking business was not secure enough. She did not want to expand it too much, for fear of the tax inspector, who might put a stop to her business altogether, or of clients who might be too fussy or refuse to pay. She therefore took on orders only from her circle of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Because this working-class circle itself led a tenuous economic existence, her business was all the more precarious.

Anna's husband has worked all his life at the *Sykytykar Machine-Building Factory* (*Sykytykarskii Mekhanicheskii Zavod*, or SMZ). His formal wage in 1999 was 1,000 rubles, but he hadn't received regular wages since 1994. Compared to workers at other factories, he was doing quite well, because he was at least receiving wages in kind. For example, in the month prior to our first interview in May 1996, he had received logs to build a *dacha*, and a kilo of butter. When workers protested that "they had nothing to put the butter on," management added insult to injury by giving each one 20 rubles (the equivalent of U.S.\$4) out of the back pay they were owed.

There were also some complex wage transactions. For example, the accountant at SMZ agreed to "pay" Anna for garments she had ordered by installing a telephone in Anna's apartment. This would also serve as partial payment of the wages owed to Anna's husband. Because their neighbors also wanted phones installed, and installation would be cheaper for each if the phones were installed simultaneously (it would cost 8,000 rubles for three phones), Anna suggested that the accountant arrange to have the three lines installed at once, and that the neighbors pay her directly for their share of the expense. But now there was tension, because Anna's neighbors were paying up very slowly. In 1998, Anna's husband also received in lieu of wages a fridge, construction materials (again, for a *dacha*), and an assortment of school supplies. He has looked around for other jobs but has found nothing better. The foundry where he works is one of the few workplaces that continue to receive orders.

In 1999, the couple was living with their son (11) and daughter (seven) in a three-room apartment on the ground floor of a frame house. The building was nearly 40 years old and badly in need of repair, especially after a gas explosion in the kitchen; but Anna hadn't the money to fix it, and the municipality wouldn't do anything. Still, it was spacious. She had turned one of the rooms into a workshop, where she sewed every day. She and her husband used to live with her mother in a two-room apartment, before her mother received an apartment from Polar and moved out. They exchanged their two-room apartment for a three-room unit in the same building. The previous owners initially resisted the idea, but in the end their accumulated debts forced them to accede. Anna had to pay off a lot of bills before they could move in, but the extra room proved crucial.

Anna received a large (1,000 square meters) plot of land from Red October in 1989, through a friend who headed the manpower department (*po blatu*). The trees were cut, the land was tilled, and over the preceding decade her husband had built a cabin with materials he received in lieu of wages. Much to the consternation of her husband, Anna insisted on reserving half of the land for flowers, the passion of her life; the other half was planted in potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and other crops. Her mother and the children spend the summer holidays there. Still, Anna complains the dacha is not cost-effective, since travel back and forth is so expensive. She applies the same cash calculus to visits to her husband's family in the village. They haven't been there in two years because they have to pay not only for transportation but also for trinkets for all her nieces and nephews—all for what, a sack of potatoes?

Relations between husband and wife have shifted as she has become the major breadwinner in the family and he has to beg for humiliating handouts from his bankrupt employer. At the time of our first interview, Anna thought their relationship was better than any other, very different from that between her brother and his wife, who is always nagging him for money. At the end of the first interview, she said that although her husband had been opposed to the sewing machine at first, now he was helping her with her work. At the end of the second interview, however, she complained that he was drinking more and helping less: "When I married him in 1987, I thought I was marrying a village lad, but now I have to coerce him even to work on the dacha. Whenever I ask him to do anything, he starts bargaining, demanding cigarettes or something before he will help out. I don't know what has gotten into him."

Anna had always been an energetic leader and skilled worker. Her loyalty to Red October did not blind her to the need to seek alternative employment. With the encouragement of her neighbor and her pliant husband, she was able to slowly build up her own garment business. Depending on uncertain demand from her acquaintances, friends, and relatives, its future is precarious, which is why she continues to do what she hates—namely, to clean floors. Anna has not taken Valya's road to entrepreneurship, because she has not been forced to rely on her garment business.

*Valya: The Self-Made Entrepreneur*¹⁶

The shift from worker to entrepreneur requires more than a mobilization of assets material and social, skill- and citizenship-related. It calls for two strategic leaps: first, overcoming the disposition to play it safe by keeping one's foot in a number of niches; and second, resisting external pressures to redistribute the wealth one accumulates among poorer kin, neighbors, and friends. The shift from defensive strategies to entrepreneurial ones is not something that comes about suddenly; it emerges over a considerable period and often under the economic compulsion to survive. It was part desperation, part imagination that led Valya to become an independent trader in the local market.

Valya was born in 1968, and at our last interview she was 31 years old. Her father had died in 1973, after which her mother started to drink heavily. Her mother lost her parental rights, and Valya was taken to an orphanage at the age of five, where she stayed until she was 15. At the time, she could not forgive her mother; but looking back on those orphanage years now, she thinks she learned a great deal—especially, to be self-reliant. One of her teachers was like a second mother to her. She did well in classes, had an active social life, received rewards and trips, and even became a Komsomol leader. She recalls how freely she traveled under communism, whereas now it's too expensive.

At 15, Valya left the orphanage, returned to her mother's home, and entered a vocational college, where she received a professional certificate as a switchboard operator. She began working at the Central Telephone Exchange in 1988 but was soon forced to quit the job because customers complained about her rudeness, which Valya blamed on conflicts with her husband at home. Be that as it may, she quickly realized this work was not for her and took a job at Polar, working in the shop that lacquered the chipboard panels for the wall systems. During that time she also enrolled in courses at the commerce department of the timber industry academy, but she had to give that up when her son became sick.

In 1994, with work and wages both irregular, she left Polar to work in retail sales at an agricultural supply store—a job she found through a friend of her mother's, who happened to be the proprietor. There she met her second and current husband, who was doing some electrical work. Together they left the store in 1996 because the business was nearing bankruptcy, the conditions were poor (no sick benefits or maternity leave), and her husband was accused of stealing. Nevertheless, her two years at this store had taught her a great deal about retail trade, preparing her for her new occupation as a trader at the town market.

Another reason she had for leaving this store was that she was expecting a baby. When we interviewed her in 1997, she was living with her mother, an unemployed pensioner; her husband, aged 19, who was receiving minimal unemployment benefits; and her two children—a son of 12 and a daughter of one year. Out of desperation, in May 1997, she started her own trade in processed food, working from home. Like many of the traders at the nearby city market, she employed her own seller—a neighbor who had been a bookkeeper but had recently been laid off. She had complete confidence in her new employee, who received a nominal wage and a commission of 7 percent of the profit. Her husband transported the goods to and from the market everyday, having first collected them from the local wholesale center. He borrowed the van of a close friend, whom they paid back in gas and maintenance.

The markup on the wholesale price was much smaller, of course, than it would have been for fresh food products imported from distant cities. Many women participated in long-distance trade, going to Moscow to buy goods and then reselling them at a higher price in the north. Valya could not do this: In addition to paying her seller, she had to pay for her market space, taxes, and interest on the

money she borrowed (at 10 percent per month). She also was forced to pay for protection. She nonetheless made a reasonable profit of about 2,000 rubles a month—a little more than the average wage, with the added advantage of its being actual money.

When we returned two years later, in 1999, Valya's business had expanded, but she was not living any better. She now controlled four kiosks and employed saleswomen at each of them. In order to survive, she was paying them a very low official wage (500 rubles a month), but she gave them another 700 to 1,000 rubles under the table in "bonuses." She was still borrowing money but had learned that it is best not to borrow from friends. The same rule applies to hiring: She judges potential employees on the basis of their references. Valya has her own car, a pager, and even extra storage space, but she has no ambition to open a retail store. She says if you need 15 official signatures just to open a kiosk, you can imagine how impossible it is to open a store. The previous two years had not been all clover, and she continued to live precariously on the margins. Indeed, in the second half of 1998, her child fell ill and she was forced to register on the unemployment rolls.

From the beginning, a critical asset to Valya's business was her apartment, which was situated on the ground floor of a rundown, two-story frame apartment building equipped with poorly functioning central heating. Its singular advantage was its proximity to the town market. In addition, it had three rooms (though totaling only 36 square meters of living space). Valya stored her goods in the coldest room (the poor heating turned out to be an asset). In this way she was able to minimize costs, including time spent in transportation. Valya and her family lived in the other two rooms.

When we interviewed Valya in 1997, her husband was helping her with her nascent business. Earlier his parents and two brothers had helped them out. But in 1999, Valya was fed up with her husband. She had hoped he would at least be available to transport produce, but he was arrested for drunken driving and lost his license. As far as she was concerned, the only thing he had done for her was give her a daughter. That had given him the right to avoid military service for a time; but now that their daughter was three, he had been called up. She was only too happy to see him leave. That would give her at least two years of respite. But she has not given up on men in general. She thinks back on her past, wondering whether she made a mistake in divorcing her first husband, and meanwhile has rediscovered her ex-lover, from her years at Polar.

Whereas the center of economic cooperation in the Soviet system was the labor collective, it has now entirely shifted over to the household, in Valya's case. She misses the security that came with state employment, better pensions, and holiday camps for children. But she admits that the shortage economy had its problems and is glad to be free to pursue her own line of business. She lives and works for her children. She wants them to have a good education, and she says she will do anything she can to give them a better life.

*Luba: Turning Back from the Brink*¹⁷

It was desperation that drove Valya into trade. Sitting at home with her newborn baby, she seized what opportunities were available to her—an apartment next to the marketplace, and an unemployed husband ready to work at her behest. Even now, with her business expanded, with a car and pager and several employees at her command, she still lives on the edge of poverty, knowing that moving out of her ramshackle wooden apartment is just a dream.

If Valya took the low road, Luba took the high road into retail trade. Still, like Valya, she confronted political and economic obstacles, which in the end forced her to give up the idea of developing her own, independent business. She had to contend with not one but two male-dominated worlds: that of the former *nomenklatura*, who early on had secured monopolies in trade, and that of the extortionist mobs. Luba's social connections, material assets, and organizational skills took her farther than any of the other women in our sample, but only because she led an abstemious, kopeck-pinching life, always aware of the precariousness of her family's existence.

At 42 in 1999, Luba was ten years older than Valya. She hails from a village near Syktyvkar, graduated from a culinary college, and married a local teacher who subsequently became a KGB officer. She saw him as her escape from the village and did not expect the marriage to last the ten years that it did. She took a job at Polar in 1984 with the explicit purpose of earning enough money to buy her husband a car. Then he was seconded to Usogorsk, and she went with him. There she became head of manpower in a local enterprise. When she discovered that he had been unfaithful, she left him and returned to Syktyvkar with her daughter, leaving her son behind. Her husband laughed at her, saying she'd never be able to survive without him. But she was determined. To recover her old apartment from the KGB was her first and most challenging goal, especially as KGB officers were not allowed to divorce. In the end she succeeded in recouping her former two-room apartment as well as her job at Polar. She also began receiving alimony from her ex-husband.

As in Valya's, the critical moment in Luba's career came in 1993, when Polar's fortunes began to decline, as evidenced by forced vacations, irregular pay, and disorganized work. At our first interview in July 1994, Luba expressed doubts about the enterprise's future, being critical of the way it had been privatized (passing into the hands of the collective rather than those of a single owner). She also had little sympathy for the factory's manpower policies: the elimination of managerial positions, the merging of incompatible brigades, and the layoffs of the best workers (because they were young and childless).

Luba had a precocious understanding of efficiency and markets. She could see the future of Polar as clearly as though it were written on the wall. As early as February 1994, she began experimenting with work on the side. When there was no work at the factory, she would travel to Moscow to buy goods that she could resell at home in Syktyvkar. It was through her friends that Luba joined the growing

numbers of shuttle-traders, or *chelnoki*, at the same time that Valya was entering retail. As the factory was already paying workers in kind, she took one of the wall systems in lieu of wages and installed it in her own apartment, selling the one she already had. At this point, the child support she received for her daughter was her primary source of monetary income.

In July 1994, she took the critical step of leaving Polar. She saw no need to continue inhaling lacquer fumes. For what? For unstable employment? Those who stayed behind in Polar were either supported by their husbands or were waiting for early retirement. She was in neither position. Through a chance encounter, she found a job as a secretary in the Bulgarian consulate in Syktyvkar. The pay was good and in dollars, which at that time of soaring inflation was a major advantage. She lasted three months there before resigning in the face of excessive demands and insults about her lack of education. But she had developed a taste for money.

In November she took up a job in a small, poorly maintained store, where she worked until May 1995. She knew the manager as a friend from Polar. The store had no future, but she persisted nevertheless, earning money on the side and learning about the retail trade. Once more it was Luba's connections that gave her the next break. Many of her neighbors were connected to the KGB and had strong ties to local notables. It was through one such neighbor that Luba found a job in a new supermarket selling construction materials. The store was owned by the son of one of the most influential politicians in the republic. The customers were wealthy, the profits were handsome, and her wages were considerable, especially when she included the money she made on the side. Luba explained that the owner cheated the state out of its taxes, and the sales staff in turn cheated the owner of his profits. Within three months, she was able to buy a car and a television set, and she had saved up enough dollars that she could then lend them out, at interest, to friends. These early years of market expansion were indeed the golden age of retail—especially that sponsored by the old *nomenklatura*.

The owner wanted to promote her to manager at another branch, but Luba feared the resentment she would face there as an outsider. She was especially wary of any such move when she learned that her own manager, for whom she had the greatest respect, was being fired on accusations of having absconded with company funds. Instead of accepting the promotion, Luba, together with two other senior saleswomen and their manager, resigned with the intention of setting up their own shop. As she said at the end of the second interview, they were in a good position to start their own business, having the necessary protection, contacts, and money. This didn't work out, however, because the manager decided to move into the kiosk business on her own.

Luba felt betrayed. She was left without a job; so she too tried to set up a business on her own. She started her own store, selling food, but the "roof" (protection) payments to the mafia, as well as payments to the tax officers and to the fire department, were so high that she had to abandon the project after three months. Looking back on the experience, she realized that she should have been more

willing to borrow money. To her that had seemed too great a risk. This is what separates her from Valya, who perhaps was more desperate but also more flexible in adapting to the new market forces.

Having given up the idea of her own business, she returned to being a saleswoman in a store. In 1997, her official salary was a meager 550 rubles; and at our most recent interview (in 1999), it was not much better, at 700 rubles. But that is beside the point, because she is able to sell her own goods on the side, without paying any of the associated costs (taxes, rent, or protection). In effect, like Nina, Luba conducts her own trade on the owner's premises, paying rent not in kind or in money but in hours of labor. On the side she also continues to lend out dollars to her friends at the standard interest rate of 10 percent per month.

Luba's relationship with her domestic partner was very different from Valya's. In 1990, soon after returning to Syktyvkar, Luba had struck up an acquaintance with a man ten years her junior. She openly conceded that theirs was more an arrangement for convenience's sake than an affair of the heart. She did not want to register the relationship, having been disillusioned by her first marriage. She provides a roof for him, while he does all the "man's work" around the apartment. In 1997, he had a job at the Municipal Water Works. Luba reported at our third interview that he used to contribute some 2,000 rubles a month to the household budget but of late had only been receiving an advance of 200 rubles. She was exasperated with his passivity. In the neighboring municipality, workers who had threatened to cut off water supplies had quickly recovered their wage arrears. Why couldn't he and his coworkers do the same in Syktyvkar? When we returned two years later, in June 1999, he had not been working for five months. He hadn't even received all the back pay owed him. He was using her car as a private taxi for hire. He had been doing this for a number of years; but since losing his job, he was making more money at it than before—some 2,000 rubles in one weekend. But they feared that he would be caught by a tax inspector traveling incognito. So he did not do his undeclared taxi-driving work during the week.

Like Valya, Luba had no time for a dacha. When we asked if she had one, she shot back, in an insulted tone, "I'm not 50 years old! Why do I need a dacha?" In her eyes a dacha was for those who had no employment potential, who were no longer active—in other words, for pensioners and others with plenty of time at their disposal. The dacha is the antithesis of the market world in which Luba lives and thrives. Whereas many of our informants could not afford a dacha, or could not afford to cultivate their dacha, Luba was the only one who dismissed the very idea of self-provisioning. Yet she does dream of returning to the village where she grew up; and going to the forest to collect mushrooms and berries is one of her greatest pleasures. The countryside to her connotes an escape from the pressures of the marketplace rather than a substitute economy.

In our first three interviews with her, Luba's aspirations were focused on her daughter, who she hoped would enter law school at the university. In 1997, the daughter entered a local community college that prepares students for university. Luba herself was planning to pay the fees, which are exorbitant in Syktyvkar Uni-

versity's most prestigious departments, such as law. In 1999, her daughter was working at a local photography business for a pittance of 350 rubles a month; but she was also enrolled in a correspondence course in commerce. She travels to Moscow twice a year for examinations. Luba would have preferred that her daughter transfer to the college in Moscow as a full-time student, but she could not afford to pay the tuition and living expenses there.

Her son had rejoined them from Usogorsk in 1997, and in 1999 he was in his last year of high school. Luba was already scheming to get him an exemption from military service. She thought she would be able to bribe her way through to a waiver with the help of a neighbor who worked at the local military draft center. She was unhappy with her son's progress at school, for which she blamed his stepmother in Usogorsk. But she consoled herself that at least her partner and her son were getting along well.

Luba's closest kin are her sister, brother, and father. Her sister, five years younger than herself, is married to a man who like Luba's companion, is employed in the Municipal Water Works department. Luba regularly helps her sister out financially. In 1997, Luba reported that her brother, five years older than herself, was living by himself in a hostel, divorced, and a drunkard. Rather than give him money, which he simply spends on alcohol, she gave him clothes. But she was despairing of helping him, since when he was drunk, he sold his clothes for more vodka. In 1999, Luba told us that he was now serving a three-year prison sentence.

Luba's father was still living in the village. She and her sister used to help him grow vegetables and other crops; but since he had taken up with a new partner, they rarely visited him, because of the tension between them and her. As to her relations with her own partner's relatives, Luba said, they used to be rather cool but had improved over time, as it became obvious what an effective and caring homemaker she was.

In 1997, Luba complained that she no longer had any friends, only contacts. She used to spill out her woes to her partner and her sister, both of whom had a ready ear; but they had so many problems of their own that she didn't want to overburden them with hers. In 1999, she was ruminating about the future. She had plans of buying a plot of land and building a house in her home village, so that her children could have her apartment. Despite her previous failures, Luba has not given up the idea of opening up her own shop. "The third time's a charm," she said, but she was only too aware of the very real problems she would have to overcome.

Luba did not follow Valya across the Rubicon into her own business, nor would she consider bringing her partner into some joint business. Instead she has withdrawn into a strategy of household diversification rather than concentration, deploying the managerial talents she inherited from the old regime in multiple commercial operations. Of all the women we interviewed, she is the closest to the energetic, self-reliant stereotype of the "new Russian woman." But she re-

mains focused on the future of her children, for whom she is ready to make any sacrifice.

In comparing Nina, Anna, Valya, and Luba, we see both the risks and the imagination necessary to take the entrepreneurial road. Valya is the only one who has developed her own business. Her family is completely dependent upon it, and paradoxically, their living conditions are the worst. Nina is forced into selling manufactured garments as a means of realizing her wages. She is unusual among her coworkers in peddling Red October's bras and dressing gowns. Anna clings to her cleaning job as a source of income and an escape from home; but most importantly, it is a shield to protect her more lucrative work on the side. She could expand her business, but she fears depending upon it, because her clients are so poor, their livelihoods so uncertain. Of the four, Luba is the best equipped to develop her own business; but she has learned that the safest way is to conduct it under the "roof" of another—the owner of the shop she looks after. She is only too aware of the barriers to entrepreneurship posed by the joint conspiracy of mafia and governmental control.

As economic involution has deepened, it has driven working-class families back into defensive strategies of diversification and sharing. It has also created opportunities in the sphere of exchange; but for the workers of Polar and Red October, such opportunities are limited, being found only at the lowest rungs of a politically organized economy of trade, protection, and banking. The most enterprising women of the working class are but the fodder of a vast, male-regulated economy of transactions that occupies spaces vacated by the party-regulated, redistributive Soviet economy. Russian society is increasingly polarized between a class of marginal households retreating to subsistence and self-provisioning, largely headed by women, and a male class of merchants and regulators.

The Network Society

In accounting for the startling failure of the Russian economic transition, two social theories have assumed popular currency: cultural legacies and institutional collapse. Those who adopt the first perspective argue that the abiding legacies of communism have mired Russia in its dark past; those who adopt the second, that communism was so fragile that it collapsed like a house of cards, before Russians had a chance to create a new order to take its place, leaving an institutional vacuum and normlessness.

Our study of survival strategies suggests that there is some truth in both theories. We have shown how the inheritance of material assets, human skills, and social relations has shaped the terrain on which strategies are forged. The state continues to play a crucial redistributive role of last resort. These legacies, however, don't work in a historical vacuum; they are not the leaden weight of tradition. They are more like magnets around which poor people navigate their lives. Individuals strategize around resources—housing, occupational skills, education, re-

lations of kinship and friendship, and state assistance—which they inherit or lose, which they create anew or dissipate. We can say that there is continuity with the Soviet order in the taken-for-granted routines that organize the deployment of resources, but these routines are combined in novel ways in response to the new circumstances.

If resources provided a certain fixity to their lives, economic involution transmits a radical uncertainty, which continually threatens to destroy the connection between means and ends. Institutions have indeed collapsed—specifically, the party and the workplace—and new institutions have yet to be consolidated. But an institutional vacuum is not the same as normlessness. People are thrown back on kin and friends, a network society that develops and sustains its own culture of diversification and reciprocity. Where before institutions homogenized and directed behavior, today their disappearance has opened up new opportunities for many-sided activities and for sharing; and for the risk-takers, concentration and accumulation. What marks Russian life today is the inventiveness of what was its working class. In the face of economic uncertainty, reactions have been remarkably stable and rational when looked at holistically, which is why we can speak of strategies at all.

At the same time, however, the process of economic involution has destroyed the grounds of collective solidarity without creating new ones; the workplace has dissolved and been replaced by the household. If the old regime could contain collective mobilization only by combining coercive strategies and individual inducements, the new regime has not created the institutional infrastructure to generate solidarities, and by the same token does not require the same repression. As Antonio Gramsci said of prerevolutionary Russia, civil society is “primordial and gelatinous,” and we can say the same of postrevolutionary Russia. Instead of civil society, today we have a network society that absorbs the blows of involution but without bringing people together around visions that would propel them into collective action. Quite the opposite: Involution brings about the contraction of time and space horizons so that collective action seems more and more irrational.

Appendix: Some Poverty Statistics for Syktyvkar¹⁸

In order to interpret some of the ruble figures we have used in the text, the following data may be of use. The Komi Republic’s statistical office regularly adjusts the cost of living for a single individual based on minimum calorific intake, interviews, and prices. We have the average annual figure for Syktyvkar, along with the percentage of the Komi Republic’s population whose incomes are below this poverty line (see Table 11.1). There is an obvious arbitrariness about these figures, but they are calculated in the same way every year, so they are a good measure of change. Pensions have kept ahead of the poverty level, and in Komi, because it has a relatively young population with relatively high levels of employment, they have so far been paid regularly. We also include the average of-

TABLE 11.1 Living Standards in the Komi Republic, 1994–1998
(monthly incomes or expenditures, in new rubles)

| | Dollar-Ruble Exchange Rate | Average Pension (Komi Republic) | Average Wage in Industrial Sector (Syktyvkar) | Minimum Living Standard per Individual (Syktyvkar) | %Population Below Minimum Standard of Living (Komi Republic) |
|------|-------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| 1994 | 2.2 | 162.7 | 281 | 115.8 | 18.4 |
| 1995 | 4.6 | 311.6 | 730 | 325.3 | 19.2 |
| 1996 | 5.1 | 409.3 | 1,119 | 435.1 | 20.2 |
| 1997 | 5.8 | 472.5 | 1,421 | 430.7 | 16.7 |
| 1998 | 6/20* | 481.9 | 1,624 | 479.8 | 20.6 |

*Figures are approximate exchange rates before and after August 17.

SOURCES: *Respublika Komi v tsifrakh* [The Komi Republic in Figures] (Syktyvkar: Goskomstat Komi, 1999); *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie gorodov i raionov* [Socioeconomic Conditions in Cities and Regions] (Syktyvkar: Goskomstat Komi, 1999); “Dannye sluzhby zaniatosti goroda Syktyvkara” [Data of the Employment Office of the City of Syktyvkar] (unpublished).

ficial wage in the industrial sector. It has more or less kept up with inflation, which is of less significance than the nonpayment of wages, payment in kind, and job loss.

We have managed to cull the following figures on unemployment in Syktyvkar (see Table 11.2). There is a secular increase in the number looking for work, almost twice as many as the registered unemployed. The gender composition of unemployment reflects the gender composition of employment.

Unemployment compensation fell drastically in May 1996, when an emergency situation was declared in Komi. Until that time, provided they had worked no fewer than 25 days during the preceding year, those registered as unemployed could receive: 75 percent of their average wage for the first three months of unemployment; 60 percent of their average wage for the next four months; and 45 percent of their average wage for the final five months. When the level of unemployment reached 5 percent in the towns and 6 percent in rural areas—the so-called emergency—the situation quickly changed. Only those laid off due to liquidation or restructuring had access to the old system; the rest would only receive the minimum wage, a laughable 87 rubles a month (plus 50 percent more for each child). This minimal support ends after one year, but it can be renewed for another year if after six months the individual remains unemployed.

Public assistance to low-income families is calculated on the basis of family composition, sources of income (wages, pensions, stipends, disability pay, al-

TABLE 11.2 Unemployment in Syktyvkar, 1993–1998
(figures for women are in parentheses)

| | 1993 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Looking for Work: Total | 6,416 (3,139) | 11,716 (5,511) | 10,946 (5,286) | 12,104 (5,792) | 14,873 (7,477) |
| Blue collar | 4,176 (1,648) | 7,137 (2,859) | 6,199 (2,356) | 6,875 (2,854) | 8,356 (3,652) |
| White collar | 1,736 (1,232) | 2,433 (1,728) | 2,072 (1,484) | 1,908 (1,340) | 2,755 (2,022) |
| Registered Unemployed | 1,300 (738) | 5,711 (2,907) | 3,807 (2,007) | 4,178 (2,196) | 5,937 (3,462) |
| # Employed | 125,000 | 124,800 | 123,100 | 122,300 | 106,300 |

SOURCE: *Dannye sluzhby zaniatosti goroda Syktyvkara* [Data of the Employment Office of the City of Syktyvkar]. These figures have not been officially published.

imony, and so on), and assets (dacha, apartment, savings, car, animals), and is correlated with the minimum standard of living. Since February 1997, the government has only guaranteed between 30 and 40 percent of the minimum standard of living, whereas before it would supplement income up to 100 percent of the minimum. Public assistance takes many forms, from cash to kind, from subsidies for housing maintenance or kindergarten to free school lunches for children.

Notes

My thanks to Jennifer Pierce, Ruth Milkman, and members of the Carnegie Conference for their comments and suggestions.

1. *Transition 1999: Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 1999), chapter 4.

2. The Soviet economy is conventionally understood as a "shortage economy" in which managers search, queue, and bargain for supplies, and when necessary, substitute one input for another. In this type of economy, work is continually disrupted by shortages of materials or their late arrival and by the breakdown of inadequate machinery, requiring workers continually to improvise. A capitalist economy, in contrast, is beset by "surpluses." Here the constraint is not from the side of supply but from the side of demand, which has its own distinctive effects on the organization of work.

3. The names of the two factories are fictitious, as are the names of our respondents.

4. All ruble figures are in the new denomination that was introduced January 1, 1998 (1 new ruble equals 1,000 old rubles). The exchange rates are presented in the Appendix. As a rule of thumb, one can say that before August 17, 1998, there were 5 rubles to the dollar, and after January 1, 1999, there were 25 rubles to the dollar.

5. Marina (#48): Interviews, July 9, 1995; April 1, 1999.

6. This is calculated on the basis of the minimum necessary for a single person to survive, plus 50 percent more for each child. Of course, no one can actually survive on 80 rubles (about U.S.\$3) a month.

7. About 10 percent of the population live in such cottages, but most others' are in much better condition than Marina's.

8. Tanya (#69): Interviews, June 18, 1996; March 30, 1999.

9. In the Soviet days there was close diplomatic and economic cooperation between Bulgaria and Komi. Bulgarians settled in one of the richest timbering areas of Komi and promoted the local economy with their labor. Half of the timber they cut, they took for themselves, giving the other half to Komi, together with various foodstuffs imported from Bulgaria. In 1996 this arrangement was ended, the Bulgarians went home, and the Bulgarian consulate in Syktyvkar was closed.

10. Sveta (#59): Interviews, January 30, 1996; March 13, 1999.

11. Natasha (#45): Interviews, June 29, 1995; July 2, 1997; May 11, 1999.

12. Irina (#56): Interviews, January 4, 1996; April 12, 1999.

13. Nina (#72): Interviews, July 15, 1996; April 8, 1999.

14. She traveled under the auspices of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, an organization formed at the end of perestroika to defend the rights of soldiers who were being abused in the army. They were very active in defending the interests of those serving in the war in Chechnya, and sent delegations to retrieve war prisoners.

15. Anna (#67): Interviews, August 22, 1998; April 4, 1999.

16. Valya (#10): Interviews, July 8, 1994; July 15, 1997; June 24, 1999.

17. Luba (#4): Interviews, July 5, 1994; August 20, 1996; July 18, 1997; June 27, 1999.

18. We are grateful to Svetlana Yaroshenko for supplying the documents on which this appendix is based, and for helping us interpret them.