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The Ultimate Survivors of a Century of Trauma

By Marilyn Murray

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While studying Russian history and listening to more than 2,000 Russian students for a decade, I have been surprised by much of what I have learned. Before moving here, my knowledge of traumatic Russian events consisted of fragments of information that did not have a huge impact upon me.

But as I began to piece together the stories that I heard and read about, a tragedy of enormous importance unfolded. Let me share some of the reality of what citizens of the former Soviet Union actually endured — not just the propaganda that you might have heard from the Western or the Russian side in the past. If you genuinely would like to understand why Russians do what they do, then you should first become aware of what they have personally experienced over the past 100 years.

In my advanced classes, my students made a list of all the armed conflicts and major traumas in Russia since 1900. The list does not include issues that affected limited areas, such as

an earthquake. I am listing them below to help you become more cognizant of how this population has had to constantly adapt to major trauma:

1904-05 Russian-Japanese War
1905 Revolution
1914-18 World War I
1917 Revolution
1917-91 Soviet system
1917-23 Civil war
1917-80s Repression, arrests, death or imprisonment of innocent citizens
1921-23 Famine
1928-33 Forced collectivization
1931-33 Famine
1938-39 Stalin's Great Terror
1939-40 Russian-Finnish War
1941-45 World War II
1946-48 Famine
1979-89 Afghan War
1987 Perestroika
1991 Soviet system collapses
1990s Chaos and violence
1994-96 First Chechen war
1998 Financial crash
1999-2000 Second Chechen war
1990-2011 Various terrorist attacks

The United States has been fortunate to have had few battles on its soil in years past, but Russia has almost never been without armed conflict somewhere within its borders. You may argue that Russia has much more territory than the United States, but the majority of Russian conflicts have been within a territory not larger than America.

Are you aware of the statistics comparing the loss of life in World War II of the Russians and the other Allies? The facts were startling for me:

- The United States lost 418,500 men and women.
- The total for the United States, Britain and France was 1,435,900.
- The total for the Soviet Union (military and civilians) was 23,400,000 (16 times greater than the United States, Britain and France combined), and many sources claim this to be as high as 27 million.
- Russia lost more soldiers and civilians in one battle — 532,000 people in the Battle of Stalingrad — than the United States did in the entire war.
- The United States lost 0.32 percent of its population.
- The Soviet Union lost at least 13.9 percent of its population.

How does an entire country deal with such devastation and loss?

When I taught graduate psychology students in a U.S. university, I formulated what I termed a "Psychological Mathematical Equation to Determine Human Behavior," which combined

general theories regarding the causation of human behavior: genetics, parenting, environment, sociology, birth order, experiences of trauma and abuse, plus several hypotheses of my own. The students were required to complete this equation as a graduation project. They worked on it for almost a year, and a major portion of the time was spent researching three to four generations of their families. Everyone always came back with amazing and often surprising results.

In my classes in Russia, the advanced students are also given the opportunity to complete their own equations. This is an invitation-only, 80-hour class with a maximum of 10 participants. Thus far we have completed nine classes here, and I have had the unique opportunity of listening to four-hour presentations from about 90 people from across the former Soviet Union as they tell incredible stories of their family history through many generations. The disquieting results are:

- The majority have ancestors who once were peasants and almost all have at least one or more grandfathers or great-grandfathers who were declared "kulaks" by the Soviet system. This term was given to any peasant who had become even remotely successful in farming his small portion of land. If he had more than one cow or horse or if he hired one person to help him with his harvest, he was declared a kulak, an enemy of the state, and the Soviets confiscated all of his property. He then was either shot, exiled to the Far East or north, or sent to the gulag. His entire family sometimes was sent with him or, if they were allowed to remain in their home village, they also were labeled as enemies of the state.
- Every family lost loved ones during World War II, both men and women in the military, and many of their family members at home also died as a result of Nazi occupation, bombings, illnesses (with no medication available) and especially due to starvation.
- When war veterans returned home, they almost always were wounded physically and deeply wounded psychologically and often were addicted to alcohol, as they had been given vodka on a regular basis to numb their emotions in order to enable them to remain on the battlefields in horrific situations.
- Almost every family had members who were repressed by the Soviet system, especially during Stalin's reign. The word "repression" translates into being declared an "enemy of the state," and this label was given to members of the clergy, intelligentsia, and the artistic and cultural community. The person who was repressed often was shot immediately or, if allowed to live, was exiled or put into the gulag. Their families suffered terribly as they also were branded as enemies of the state.

As our class participants listen to these personal family stories of intense pain and sorrow for many hours, they all are stunned by the enormity of what their families have endured. The students all inevitably say they now have a total new level of respect and love for their parents, grandparents and even for great-grandparents, who most never knew. They realize that their personal survival today is truly a miracle and the blood that flows through their veins came with a very high price.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray

Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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