From "Godfather of the Kremlin" by Paul Klebnikov

The Death of a Nation

The result of Gaidar's hasty liberalization of prices meant that more than 100 million people who had achieved some kind of basic material prosperity under the Soviets were plunged into poverty. Schoolteachers, doctors, physicists, lab technicians, engineers, army officers, steelworkers, coalminers, carpenters, accountants, telephone receptionists, farmers—all had been wiped out. The crash liberalization of trade, meanwhile, allowed Russia's natural-resource wealth to be looted by insiders. The Russian state was deprived of its biggest revenue source; consequently it had no money for pensions, worker's salaries, law enforcement, the military, hospitals, education, and culture. Gaidar's shock therapy set in motion a relentless decline—economic, social, demographic—that would last until the end of the Yeltsin era.

While the rest of the developed world continued to grow, the Russian economy was shrinking. In the Gorbachev era, the Soviet Union had been the world's third largest economy (after the United States and Japan). Naturally, the Russian economy alone would be significantly smaller than that of the former Soviet Union. But the real decline occurred after the Soviet Union broke up. From the beginning of Gaidar's shock therapy, Russia's gross domestic product shrank by approximately 50 percent in just four years. Eventually, Russia would sink below the level of China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Mexico. ON a per capita basis, Russia would become poorer than Peru. Decades of technological achievement were lost. Renowned scientific institutions fell apart. The Russian cultural establishment disintegrated. And the country's assets were sold off.

Anyone who traveled to Russia in the early Yeltsin years was treated to the spectacle of ordinary Russian citizens trying to get by. Outside the ramshackle, hollow concrete structures that were the Soviet Union's supermarkets, new private bazaars formed, which included not just brawn *babushkas* selling vegetables, but also little huts offering bad quality imported goods: CD's of disco music, fake Nikes, Marlboros, cans of Vietnamese pork. These bazaars sprawled out in the mud and the garbage at subway stations, along the big avenues, in populated areas.

On Stoleshnikov Lane, near the legendary Moscow Art Theater, around the corner from the Bolshoi Theatre, elderly men and women gathered daily and formed two parallel lines along what de fact had become a pedestrian street. Anyone who ran the gauntlet of these pensioners, neatly dressed in their tattered clothing, was besieged by silent pleas to buy a teakettle, a pair of knitted stockings, three wineglasses, a secondhand sweater, a used pair of leather shoes. Meanwhile, beautiful antique volumes began piling up in the bookstores, selling for ridiculously low prices—Moscow's intellectuals were selling their libraries. In the flea markets outside the city, you could buy the highest Soviet battle decorations, the equivalent of the Victoria Cross or the Congressional Medal of Honor: the

old veterans of World War II were selling their medals to buy a few scraps for the dinner table.

With Russia in a slump far worse than the Great Depression, people tapped an old survival instinct. Amid rumors of crop failure and impending food shortages, millions of city dwellers traveled to the countryside to plant cabbages and potatoes in their garden plots. The arable land just outside Moscow was swarming with people digging and planting. It was back to medieval agriculture. Chubais and Gaidar were proud of the fact that mass starvation had been avoided. But it was avoided not because prices had been liberalized, but because the Russian people had returned to the countryside. It was with a shovel and sack of seed potatoes that Russians escaped starvation in 1992 and 1993.

Any doubts about the first years of the Yeltsin Era's being a disaster were dispelled by the demographic statistics. These numbers, even in their most general form, suggested a catastrophe without precedent in modern history—the only parallel was with countries destroyed by war, genocide, or famine.

Between 1990 and 1994, male mortality rates rose 53 percent, female mortality rates 27 percent. Male life expectancy plunged from an already low level of sixty-four years in 1990 to fifty-eight in 1994; men in Egypt, Indonesia, or Paraguay could now expect longer lives than men in Russia. In the same brief period, female life expectancy fell from seventy-four to seventy-one. The world had seldom seen such a decline in peacetime.

Each month thousands of Russians were dying prematurely. Such a drop in life expectancy, labeled "excess deaths", has always been the standard algorithm in demographer's calculations of the death toll of disasters—whether Stalin's collectivization in the 1930's, Pol Pot's rule in Cambodia in the 1970's, or the famine in Ethiopia in the 1980's. American demographer Nicholas Eberstadt estimated the number of "excess deaths" in Russia between 1992 and 1998 was as high as three million. By contrast, Eberstadt observed, Russia's losses in World War I were 1.7 million deaths.

Many premature deaths occurred among the elderly—the *babushkas,* church ladies, and old men—people who had seen their life savings disappear in the great inflation of 1992, who had seen their pension checks turn worthless, who did not have families to support them, and who simply could not scrape together enough money for a nutritious diet or medicine. The stress of finding themselves in the ferocious unknown world that emerged after Communism was also a major (though unquantifiable) factor in killing off the elderly. It was a frightening experience for them—coming in the twilight of their lives, when they were weak and slow—the feeling of seeing the world turn upside down, the streets become unfamiliar, all the comforting supports of life swept away. Many hung on for a while, wandering around town; the men became drunks sprawled in the icy gutter; the women became bone-thin ladies begging it the entrance of churches;

then they died. The younger generation had turned its back on its elders and allowed them to perish.

A more visible factor in the rise in mortality was the disintegration of Russia's public health system. Hospitals were suddenly unsanitary, underfunded, underequipped, bereft of medicine. Suddenly Russia was suffering outbreaks of diseases associated with the most impoverished regions of the Third World: diphtheria, typhus, cholera, and typhoid.

Tuberculosis, the great killer of the Industrial Revolution, was largely wiped out in the twentieth century with the advent of antibiotics and better public hygiene. But in the 1990's, Russia found itself with hundreds of thousands of active TB cases and even more dormant cases. The most worrying aspect of this phenomenon was the appearance of drug-resistant TB—a highly infectious strain of the bacterium resistant to any known antibiotic. The breeding ground of this scourge was the prison system—active TB afflicted up to 10 percent of Russia's huge prison population. Under conditions of overcrowded cells and minimal medical treatment, the disease spread rapidly and was transmitted further into the general population. Each year some 300,000 people (mostly young men) entered the prison system, while a slightly smaller number of convicts were released upon the completion of their term. According to two researchers studying Russia's problem, Dr. Alexander Goldfarb of New York's Public Health Research Institute and Mercedes Becerra of the Harvard Medical School, Russia's prisons released 30,000 cases of active TB into society, and 300,000 carriers of the dormant bacterium every year. If nothing was done to address the problem, Goldfarb declared, the number of TB cases would continue to double every year, reaching 16 million by 2005 (11 percent of the population).

If the living conditions were appalling for the one million young men in Russia's prisons, they were hardly any better for the 1.5 million in the armed forces. Every year, 2,000 to 3,000 young conscripts perished—either by suicide, murder, accident, or hazing incidents. (The precise number of these kinds of deaths was not released by the army.)

The Yeltsin era witnessed an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases. Between 1990 and 1996, new syphilis cases identified every year skyrocketed from 7,900 to 388,200. AIDS was virtually unknown in Russia in the years before Communism fell. Since then, fed by burgeoning intravenous drug use and rampant, unprotected sex, AIDS spread with geometric rapidity through the Russian population. The government had no idea of the precise number of people afflicted, but based on the growth of visible AIDS cases, Dr. Vadim Pokrovsky, the nation's leading epidemiologist, estimated that Russia would have 10 million people infected by 2005 (almost all between 15 and 29).

A significant portion of the increase in mortality rates in Russia was due to lifestyle choices: an unhealthy diet, heavy smoking, and perhaps the highest rate of alcohol consumption in the world. Drug addiction took an increasing toll. Initially, post-Communist Russia had served only as a transshipment point for opium and heroin form

Southeast Asia or Central Asia to the West. Soon the drugs began to appear in Russia itself. By 1997, Russia's domestic market had ballooned into one of the largest narcotics markets in the world. According to official estimates, Russia had 2 million to 5 million drug addicts (3 percent of the population). These were mostly young men and women.

For the older generation, the poison of choice was alcohol. It was impossible to tell just how much alcohol was consumed in Russia, since so much of the vodka was produced in bootleg distilleries. One 1993 survey found that more than 80 percent of Russian men were drinkers and that their average consumption was more than half a liter of alcohol per day. In 1996, more than 35,000 Russians died of alcohol poisoning, compared to several hundred such deaths the same year in the United States.

Heavy drinking and crime contributed to a spectacular rise in violent and accidental deaths—the single fastest-growing "cause of death" category. Between 1992 and 1997, 229,000 Russians committed suicide. 159,000 died of poisoning while consuming cheap vodka, 67,000 drowned (usually the result of drunkenness), and 169,000 were murdered.

While Russians were dying in increasing numbers, fewer children were being born. In the late 1990's, there were 3 million state-funded abortions each year—nearly three times the number of live births. Abortions had long been used by Soviet women as the primary method of birth control. The average Russian woman had three or four abortions: many women had ten or more. As a result of these multiple abortions, as well as drug addiction, one third of Russian adults were estimated to be infertile by the late 1990's.

The rapid decline in births, combined with an even faster growth in mortality rates, produced a relentless decline in Russia's population. In 1992, the Russian population was 148.3 million. By 1999, the population had fallen by 2.7 million people. If it had not been for the immigrants coming into Russia from the even more desperate situation in the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, the Russian population would have shrunk by nearly 6 million between 1992 and 1999. These figures did not include the millions of Russians (mostly the healthier, more enterprising members of the younger generation) who had emigrated to Europe or North America unofficially.

The most pitiful victims of Russia's social and economic decline were the children. In 1992, 1.6 million children were born in Russia; that same year, 67,286 children (4 percent of all births) were abandoned by there parents. By 1997, the breakdown in parenting had grown to catastrophic levels. That year, 1.3 million children were born, but 113,000 children (equivalent to 9 percent of all newborns) were abandoned. Russia had no real program of adoption or foster care, so most of these children ended up on the street. According to some Western aid agencies, there were more than 1 million abandoned children wandering around Russia's cities by the end of the 1990's. The rest ended up in the vast orphanage network. Here they were left in dark, overcrowded wards, haunted by malnutrition, insufficient medical care, and routine abuse by the staff

and older orphans. At least 30,000 Russian orphans were confined to psychoneurological *internaty* for "incurable children"; an easily reversible speech defect such as a cleft palate was enough to get a child classified as "imbecile' and locked up in an institution where he or she would be essentially left to die. It didn't need to be this way—95 percent of Russia's orphans still had a living parent.

When I first went to Togliatti to interview the directors of Avotaz, I decided to take the train to Moscow. The journey would last twenty-four hours, but I usually liked traveling by train in Russia—rumbling through the countryside in those 1930's -era railcars was one of the best ways to meet people.

In the carriage of my Togliatti train was a mother with an ailing seven-year old child. It was hot. The boy was stripped to his underwear. He was covered with sores—he had a very wiry, blistered little body. His mother was evidently taking him home after an unsuccessful attempt to get him treated for some skin disease. The boy was in agony. He kept wanting to scratch himself. He was crying. His mother applied plasters to the worst of the sores. "Mama…Mama…it hurts," he called out.

The boy's suffering continued throughout the night, his cries echoing through the darkened railroad carriage. The next morning the passengers seemed more silent and subdued than usual; there was a palpable sense of people trying to harden themselves against the child's suffering. The boy finally fell asleep in midmorning. I saw the mother sitting in the corridor alone, gazing blankly at the passing Russian landscape.