

Chelsea Swanson, Student Participant
Hoover High School, Iowa

Russian Poverty

The Paradox of hunger and obesity in Russia is an enigma in and of itself. After looking more in depth into the issue one discovers it is not just the obvious issue that it appears to be but a much deeper problem. There are many factors that have led up to the poverty problem of Russia. These problems have a direct correlation to the hunger and obesity issues in Russian society. Russia is located in northern Asia, bordering the Arctic Ocean. A large part of Russia is tundra and is too dry and cold to produce agriculture, therefore Russia lacks proper soils and climates to have sustainable agriculture. The country's natural resources are major oil deposits, natural gas, coal, and some other minerals. Russia's population is 143,420,309 as of July 2005(CIA). Russia is approximately 1.8 times bigger than the United States in size. In the 2002 estimate the labor force is split up into three occupational forces. These three are agriculture, industry, and services, the largest of these being industry and service (CIA). In January 2003, the poverty level was at 25%, which is the heart of the issues to be discussed in this paper. There are many different views that must be considered before the situation can be addressed. Such views include the effects on society, the health effects on the individual, the location of hunger and obesity, and even some of the psychological reasons and issues of the Russian individuals. The paradox of obesity and hunger lies in the fact that one country can hold both extremes. The fact that there is a wide spread problem of obesity as well as a widespread problem of hunger under the same country and government is a large contradiction. The fact is that there is no perfectly balanced nation and in all actuality most countries' nutrition is becoming even more unbalanced as time passes. The issue of Russian poverty has a direct correlation to that of the hunger and obesity rate. Most social classes in Russia are facing the same problem of obesity and some of the same problem with hunger and these issues are tied into the problem with poverty. One out of every four Russian citizens lives under the poverty level (Johnston).

Throughout the 20th century Russia has faced many economic as well as social stresses. The years following the reforms in the early nineties can best be described as a time of income inequality and economic problems (Dore). A good portion of Russia's economic struggle comes from the "transition" in 1991. Transition is the word commonly used to refer to the fall of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is known as the most rapid and unexpected major social transformation of the twentieth century (Mayer). Due to this rapid change in government one of the areas that suffered most was that of the economy. The transition led to the elimination of the socialist economy and the start of a whole new economic system for Russia. The socialist economy turned into a market economy. Every year since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's gross domestic product has shrunk (Sullivan 21). If the economy is not working then how is society supposed to function successfully? The answer is that it can not. The economic situation is not just the trading of products but also affects the standard currency, food shortages, and has caused many workers to go months without receiving pay (Sullivan 21).

The problem of poverty is a very realistic problem for a large part of the Russian population. Some forty million people live below the poverty line, which is thirty dollars a month (Sullivan 21). Without a stable economy one can expect at least a significant portion

of the population to be impoverished. The rural areas of Russia are not necessarily the most or most likely to be impoverished areas. The urban areas of Russia have also been hit hard by poverty. When a society reaches the hunger level the contributing factors such as the income level and food distribution must be considered. The status of the family or community has no correlation to the issues of hunger and malnutrition. In Russia the average per capita income is one hundred and forty-five dollars a month. This income is enough for a meager life in a rural village but not nearly enough for city living.

The epidemic of obesity is growing in Russia. It is reported that sixteen percent of Russian children are overweight or obese. In Russia both low and high income families have a greater risk of obesity than those in the middle class (Cristol). People are eating diets that are higher in fat meaning that even though it may be the same amount of food that is usually eaten, the fat content is higher. The problem of obesity is not just confined to well-fed, high income countries but is also spreading into developing nations such as Russia. Obesity is not just confined to urban areas, as some would assume it to be, but rural areas are also affected by the problem of obesity. For example, the small nomadic reindeer herders who live in the tundra known as the Evenki are facing the problem of obesity. The Evenki group's rise in weight is due to changes in diet and lifestyles. The political and social events in Soviet and Russian history have influenced the obesity patterns in this population (Friedrich). In this group of people the obesity rate has increased the most among the women of the community. The women used to have active roles in their communities, but once the Soviet regime took over the women were forced to do domestic chores which are not as active as the women were used to. Due to this change in lifestyle the women's obesity rate raised by a significant amount, whereas the men's rate stayed approximately the same. The interesting concept is that although adults are getting heavier, rates of under-nutrition among the children are increasing. While the children are undernourished the children are growing into obese adults.

Even though the problem of obesity is a wide spread issue so is the problem of hunger. In the Caucasus region the Chechnya and Ingushetia area have been known as a hunger hotspot. This Chechnya hunger issue is due to military conflicts. The Russian army occupied the area for several years leaving the area after Chechnya tried to gain their independence from Russia. Due to the war there was very little food supply. There are many reasons behind hunger in Russia and one of them is that of war. Chechnya is still on the World Food Security's list of hunger hotspots. A second reason behind the hunger issue is the seclusion of some regions due to the tundra that occupies a large portion of the Russian territory. The tundra creates complications for agriculture to be grown, so how do those who live in the tundra and can not grow their own food eat? This is an issue that needs discussion. If those who can not grow their own food can not eat, then there is a slight problem. A third contributing factor is that of the financial stability. If a person can not afford the food that they need for themselves or their families, then the likelihood is that that individual or their family will be unable to eat at all once again coming back to the hunger issue at hand.

As stated above, the increase of fat laden foods and the decrease of physical activity is the leading cause of obesity throughout the world, including third world nations such as Russia (Life Weekly). But the intake of "junk food," or foods that have large amounts of fat, are not the only cause behind the rise of obesity. The highest rate of overweight and obese people is now often found in low-income groups. These populations have been left in the

middle of an obesity crisis that exists with food insecurity. People who do not have a secure supply of food are facing food related stresses everyday which can lead to obesity.

Consider why those who can afford very little are facing obesity as well as those who have a much higher budget. One way of viewing it is from the perspective of stress levels that the impoverished people face in their daily lives. The psychological term that would describe this is psychosomatic. The word in literal definition is mental and body. The mental process has a direct effect on that of the body. When the stress level increases it causes the body to experience changes. Such changes might include the change in normal patterns such as sleep pattern or even hunger or eating patterns. This is what is known as fight-or-flight syndrome (Bernstein 94). This syndrome changes the body functions around after the body has stopped releasing hormones from the pituitary gland. This change can make people want to eat more or make that person want to eat less than usual meaning an increase or a decrease in body weight. In retrospect those who are stressed out might not be eating a healthy amount or enough to have a healthy body weight.

One way to combat obesity is by combating poverty, or poverty related stress. If the government of Russia could find a way to fix the problem of poverty the impoverished peoples' stress levels would decrease a significant amount, causing the abnormal eating pattern to return to normal once again. Another way to combat the problem of obesity would be to decrease the amount of "fatty" foods eaten. If the producers can create a healthier but just as favorable snack to supply to consumers the chances are that the obesity rate will, over time, decrease. This is not an instant process. It may take many years to correct the harm that has already been done.

An idea to combat the issue of hunger in Russia is to increase the provision of food supplies to those villages in the tundra area at a less expensive cost. If the government could provide food for those who can not grow food and at a price that most could afford those who suffer from hunger might not have as much to worry over. Another way to fight hunger in Russia is to create an economic system that can support the working class. Some men have not been paid on a regular basis for many months. If the government could structure an economy to support the working class on a regular basis the workers and their families could be better taken care of. This would make the tension of not enough money decrease throughout the Russian society.

The overall issues of hunger and obesity in Russia have a direct correlation to the problem of poverty. If the Russian government had enough money then the hungry could be fed and those facing obesity could be treated and better educated about the trouble that they are truly in. Of course there are always going to be cases that can not be helped and it would be naïve to think that every single person suffering from hunger and obesity could be helped that easily, but funding would be a strong way to fight hunger and obesity. The problem comes full circle, if the poverty issues are fixed then so are those of hunger and obesity. Through this paper it can be seen that there is no one cause but a plethora of causes behind these issues in general. Through researching this specific topic the magnitude of the hunger and obesity issues world wide becomes very evident. Russia is one of the largest countries in the world and it is also a third-world country. One might hope that one of the largest countries would have a stable economy and fewer food issues than those of smaller countries, but with Russia this is not the case. With the stabilizing of the Russian government there is a possibility that these problems might be addressed sooner rather than later. Once the

government is on their feet then other problems will take priority. Russia has many issues that must be solved but is understandably unstable. Due to the transition Russia has had many struggles, but in order to help the people of the country, the country of Russia has to discover a way to stabilize itself. Russia has the same issues as any other country and hopefully can solve those issues by studying other countries examples and even some of their own to combat the problems that they have. The paradox lies in the fact that Russia has an unfortunate number of those suffering from hunger and those who are facing obesity.

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