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## Good Relations, Micro-Entrepreneurship, And Permissive Spaces: “Transitional” Homelessness In St. Petersburg

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# Good relations, micro-entrepreneurship, and permissive spaces: “Transitional” homelessness in St. Petersburg<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

*This study examines how survival strategies of homeless people in St. Petersburg, Russia, have been affected by “roll back” and “roll out” patterns of neoliberalism. The chaotic transition to market economy after 1990 caused widespread poverty, but it also provided opportunities that allowed the most marginalized people to carve out niches to exist. Outdoor markets, railway stations, and other places of petty commerce provided options to make money, while spaces for privacy and rest were offered in the dilapidated and neglected apartment blocs. After the year 2000, however, a thorough urban revitalization of the city has seriously reconfigured these spaces, thus jeopardizing the survival of the homeless.*

Homelessness was an unknown concept in Russia in the Soviet time. There was not even a word for it; the adjective *bezdomnyi* tended to apply to homeless animals rather than to human beings. People without a home were instead referred to as *brodiagi*, vagrants, or *bomzhi*, bums, but in practice they were criminalized and as such rarely visible in public. In the early 1990s however, urban residents gradually had to get used to a proliferating number of people hanging out in public places who apparently had nowhere to live and who frequently appeared as temporary night-lodgers in stairways and attics. This was a new phenomenon in a society where the state thitherto had claimed to take the responsibility for the housing of all its citizens. Homelessness was generally interpreted as a result of slack individual morals, whereas soviet-minded people blamed “capitalism” and “democracy” for the apparently corrupted behavior of the unfortunates. Those with a more liberal outlook, on the other hand, complained of an ingrained Soviet “mentality” of irresponsibility and laziness.

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During the same post-Soviet period, “shock therapy” was launched in Russia and throughout Eastern Europe to “cure” crumbling former socialist economies and include them in the world of global business. In the process, other aspects of state control and regulation were also eroded, such as social security systems, levy of taxes, administrative routines, and not least what ordinary people call “law and order.” Whereas all post-socialist states were affected by widespread unemployment, dismantled systems of social security, and proliferating poverty, Russia’s lot was harsher because of hyperinflation, an initially near-total industrial collapse, withdrawn salaries and pensions, widespread bartering, and mushrooming rates of corruption and criminality.

One may think that there should be a straight causal connection between the sudden proliferation of homelessness and the turbulent transformation of Soviet state socialism into an impoverished market economy. In many Western countries, the so-called neo-liberal turn in the 1980s contributed to increasingly visible homeless populations in large cities. Largely, this was due to a general reorientation from a political welfare paradigm to what Peck and Tickel call “roll back” neoliberalization (2002, p. 384), most notably the deregulation and an active dismantling of welfarist social institutions. Alongside cuts in public expenditures, gentrification, increased housing costs, and a shift from public support to the homeless to “faith-based” private charity, this transformation contributed to the rapid expansion of homelessness (Snow and Anderson, 1993; Wright, 1997; Kennet, 1999).

In Russia, however, deregulation did not impact the proliferation of homelessness in the same way, nor did it have the same effects on homeless people’s everyday survival. The major reason why so many homeless individuals appeared in the early 1990s was the disappearance of the laws that formerly dispatched them behind bars as well as certain factors related to homelessness that may seem “neoliberal” to a Western eye but in reality were rooted in the Soviet system. In fact, if one were to compare the Soviet era and the Putin period to the chaotic Yeltsin years, the latter provided fairly beneficial options for the everyday survival of the homeless.

Peck and Tickel’s (2002) term *rollout neoliberalization* applies to a deliberate downsizing of the Keynesian social-collectivist institutions of many Western states, processes that despite the common factor of “dismantled social welfare” only faintly resemble the dramatic, chaotic, and largely unplanned erosion of the Russian state during its years of shock therapy. Yet their

concepts may still be valuable in emphasizing the contrast between the liberalization of the 1990s and the developments after 2000. The division of major resources had now been completed, and a new environment was needed for consumption to increase and money to roll. In a manner similar to what Peck and Tickel (2002) termed a “rollout” pattern of neoliberalization, the Putin regime efficiently consolidated state power to the advantage of oligarchs and “big capital” (Rigi, 2005). This power constellation was decidedly expressed on the urban landscape and the commercial infrastructure within which homeless people try to survive. In the words of Smith (2002, p. 427) there was a “shift from an urban scale defined according to the conditions of social reproduction to one in which the investment of productive capital holds definitive precedence.” Neoliberalization has particularly tangible effects for those who are least involved in the turnover of “productive capital” and most dependent on the layout of urban space. In St. Petersburg, the consequences at the street level were so fundamental that one may talk about a major shift in what can be called “modes of homelessness.”

The focus of this study is homelessness in the Russia of the 1990s—its Soviet roots and the ways in which it was shaped by the “rollback” pattern of neoliberalization of the Yeltsin period. The chaotic transition to a market economy brought enormous hardship to poor people, but it also offered opportunities that allowed homeless people, at minimum, to survive and carve out niches to exist. The main period of field work for this study, 10 months during 1999, partly took place at the few existing St. Petersburg charities aimed at the homeless. For the most part, participant observation was conducted at places where homeless people were working, especially at railway stations. In all, acquaintance was made with some 200 people, about a third of whom remained in place throughout the field work as more permanent informants. The majority were aged between 30 and 60; about 40% were female.<sup>2</sup> Bi-annual follow-up visits were made for a few years until 2003. By then the “transitional mode of homelessness” was eliminated by the “rollout” neoliberalization pattern of the Putin period, and the thorough urban revitalization of central St. Petersburg (e.g., Dixon, 2010; Trumbull, 2010) had seriously reconfigured the spaces available to homeless people. In practice, this meant that the main field sites, “hangouts” where homeless people used to work, disappeared; in effect, the original informants could no longer be found anywhere in the city center. The revitalization program had disastrous effects for the sustenance

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<sup>2</sup> Street children have their own hangouts and were not present at these sites.

strategies that the homeless had previously employed, and serious ethnographic engagement is needed concerning the new whereabouts and survival strategies of the homeless people of St. Petersburg.

### THE SOVIET PERIOD AND ITS LEGACY

Contemporary Western research on homelessness holds that the combination of gentrification and poverty causes homelessness in a very simple way: due to increased rents costs for housing, people are compelled to move out from their homes. Some cannot find a replacement and thereby become homeless. This is not equally obvious in Russia, and the homeless Russians encountered in this study were earnestly appalled when I told them that this is a very common pathway to the streets in Sweden and the West in general. How could a country like Sweden, which is known for its humane social system, act in such a cruel way? How could such a country simply expel people from their homes because they are *poor*? There are a hundred ways to lose your home in Russia, they said, but not this one.

In the Soviet Union, housing was a civil right that each citizen was entitled to. This aim was, like many others in the plethora of communist slogans, never fully realized in practice, and shortage of housing and crammed living were, and remain, part of everyday life. Each citizen was entitled to roughly nine square meters of so-called “living space”, *zhilploshchad'*, the exact dimensions depending on region, type of housing, and/or privileges granted to certain categories of citizens. However, many never received even this quota. Nonetheless the residents had a very strong entitlement to the meager living space they actually received, and households failing to pay rent (a symbolic sum thanks to state subsidies on housing) could only be evicted if the municipality provided a cheaper place to live, which it almost always did not because of the shortage of housing (Matthews, 1993). This law remained until 2005, when a new Housing Code first permitted evictions. Yet despite of rising costs for housing, they are rarely enforced.<sup>3</sup>

None of the informants in this study, therefore, had ever lost their homes because of failure to pay rent. They all certainly *remained* homeless because they were poor, however, because the

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<sup>3</sup> Friends of mine in St. Petersburg sometimes claim to have “read somewhere” about people being evicted for failure to pay rent, but they understand it as an isolated case of authorities showing off (a threat that “this may happen to you too”), when in reality the authorities refrain from consistently enforcing the law because they realize the potentially disastrous outcome.

only way to get a hold of a permanent place to live in St. Petersburg today is to buy one. By law, housing should be allocated to overcrowded households, divorcees, etc., but the waiting list for municipal housing has been frozen since the mid-80s. More important is that homeless people by definition had no right to join the list. This has to do with a bureaucratic practice that is perfectly fundamental for the specific features of Russian modes of homelessness: the so-called propiska. The propiska is a registration at a permanent address that functions as the administrative cornerstone of the entire apparatus of population management. It determines civil rights and social benefits such as medical care, access to municipal housing and to employment centers, the right to vote, local library cards, and so forth.<sup>4</sup> In the Soviet era, even the legal right to employment depended on this registration. Today it has been replaced by an obligatory tax number that can only be obtained at one's local registration office—which, logically, presupposes a registration (Karlinsky, 2004; Höjdestrand, 2009).

The propiska is mandatory. It is a legal violation not to have one, and it is also illegal to have a propiska for the wrong place, because it only applies locally. Moreover, if one does not register temporarily after some time in a new city, one is just as guilty as somebody lacking a propiska entirely: “violating the passport laws.”<sup>5</sup> Since 2001, such an infraction incurs only a fine, not imprisonment as occurred under Soviet regimes, when crimes such as “vagrancy” and “parasitism” were outlawed as well, and homelessness was in effect criminalized. An individual lacking a propiska is administratively classified as BOMZh – Bez Opredelennogo Mesta Zhitel'stva (literally “without a specific place of residence”)— which has colloquially become the most common (and strongly derogatory) word for a homeless person – “bum.”

The double use reveals a persistent conflation between citizens who merely lack a registration at a permanent place of living and those who are literally roofless. It is not, and was never, particularly unusual to lack a propiska (in 1999, some 3 million Russians were estimated not to have one), but the vast majority of those being BOMZh in an administrative sense usually have access to makeshift jobs and housing. It has obviously always been possible to stay with other people (with or without economic retribution), and since 1991 it has become easier to rent a

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<sup>4</sup> Until 2002, the pensions were also tied to the propiska.

<sup>5</sup> Before 2004, a temporary registration had to be obtained within 3 days if one was to stay for more than 10 days outside of one's “propiska unit”, which is usually an oblast (comparable to an oversized county) or a big city such as Moscow (e.g., see Light, 2010) or St. Petersburg. Now the interim is 90 days, which is obviously more convenient in a vast country where people in fact travel rather a lot.

place to live from municipal tenants or owners of privatized apartments. For many reasons, however, it is extremely difficult to register permanently if one rents a place from a private person. Hence there is a huge population that is homeless in an administrative sense but who never would be identified as homeless “bums” by other people, although the term “bomzh” may apply to both categories. The boundary between the two is blurred because this rental market is quite insecure and – in contrast to the legal housing sector – entirely determined by people’s capacity to pay the rent. Quite a few of my informants occasionally managed to rent apartments or rooms but would return to the attics when their economy failed, while for obvious reasons I rarely met the “fortunate” ones who never had to resort to the railway stations and soup kitchens where I was working. Nonetheless all these people were affected by the same “Catch 22”: their lack of a propiska made it impossible for them to find a permanent place of living and, thereby, a propiska, including the civil rights implied by it.

The propiska was created to control migration, a perennial headache to the state power in a vast but extremely centralized country with exceptional economic and cultural differences. Originally, serfdom and tsarist forms of registration kept subjects in their place, and after some relatively relaxed years after the Revolution, the Soviet regime introduced its own registrations. The present propiska system thus was created in the early 1930s, when the violent collectivization of agriculture caused a mass escape to cities that were in the process of rapid industrialization (Matthews, 1993; Popov, 1995; Humphrey, 2001, Stephenson, 2006). Since then, the purportedly good life in the big city has continued to attract hopeful migrants from the peripheries, in spite of the attempts of the state to prevent it. In the Soviet period, a system of temporary jobs and propiski enabled some to live and work legally for limited periods of time, while others stayed on illegally, managing somehow to live in the shadow sectors of society as a huge and illegal “shadow population” (e.g., Zaslavsky, 1982; Højdestrand, 2009). The two categories overlapped insofar that the second one occasionally had the option to become legalized by getting a temporary job with enterprise housing, while on the other hand temporary workers became homeless and illegal if their contracts were not prolonged. This is one instance when neoliberalization indeed contributed to the proliferation of homelessness, insofar that many Soviet enterprises (in particular in the big cities) were dismantled after 1991 and many workers with such temporary contracts lost housing and propiska along with their jobs (Stephenson, 2006).

An even more vulnerable category used to be ex-convicts. Until 1995, people sentenced to more than six months incarceration were deprived of their propiska and their place to live, and were thus by definition homeless once they were released.<sup>6</sup> According to Soviet law, they should be assisted in finding jobs and enterprise housing (a common feature in the Soviet Union), but this system was chronically inefficient (Matthews, 1993; Bodungen, 1994; Zykov, 1999,). In practice, the only way out was to register with close family members – if the family allowed this and if it was not prevented by a number of other rules (Stephenson, 2006). Since homelessness was in practice criminalized, ex-convicts risked ending up in a perennial circuit between the penal system and the streets; a fate that befell about 40 percent of the two hundred homeless people I met and talked to. Their “careers” usually began with theft or some other minor, sometimes even major crime related to alcohol abuse, and continued with repeated imprisonments for vagrancy, violation of the passport laws, and more thefts.

### ***BARDAK: TRANSITIONAL CHAOS***

The laws that criminalized homelessness disappeared in late 1991, although the police for a few years already had executed them with less zeal. The people who now took escape in empty attics and at railway stations in the big cities were to a large extent ex-convicts who continued to leave the labor camps. Without a home to go to, they often preferred to head off to a big city where the options to survive were better. So did the migrants, who continued to leave their now fundamentally impoverished rural peripheries for a center that at least could provide some hope, as some of the homeless people I met explained. Some 20 percent of my homeless informants had become homeless in this fashion, although it should be emphasized that the large majority of migrants never end up in the streets.

These people were, basically, homeless because of Soviet law and, ironically, because they were no longer criminalized. To a certain extent neoliberal downsizing was involved too, insofar as migration was largely motivated by inability to find work or by unpaid salaries. Nonetheless

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<sup>6</sup> This practice originally stems from a principle of just distribution of scarce resources. According to the law, any municipal tenant who is proved not to have resided at his or her place of residence for more than six months may by a court decision be evicted, and the apartment should instead be given to people who presumably are in more need of them. The difference after 1995 is only that the rule no longer is applied to non-voluntary absences such as prison sentences. Moreover, the rule does not apply to privatized housing, which now outnumbers the municipal sector.



the migration pattern as such is older than neoliberal reform, and the reason why migrants cannot find jobs and establish themselves is still related directly to the propiska.<sup>7</sup>

There were other ways in which stairways and railway stations were populated by “roll out” neoliberalization, although these had less to do with policy than by unintended consequences. The aim of the neoliberal architects of “shock therapy” was to create a market; i.e. to abolish state regulations on currency and trading. As it were, the process went havoc and resulted in a largely extra-legal and violent concentration of power and capital to informal networks of state officials, businessmen, and criminal groupings (Rigi, 2005). The decentralization of state power resulted in corruption and drastically increased rates of criminality at all levels, while the resulting drainage of the state budget eroded social services that the reforms theoretically should not have touched: free medical care, child care, education, access housing (however humble), and so forth.

A symptomatic feature of this time was criminality on the real estate market. In 1991, housing as well as brokerage were deregulated. Tenants were given the opportunity to privatize their apartments if they wanted to; they could sell them legally; and private brokers appeared on the scene. Some people sold their homes with the intention to buy new ones, but lost the money in some way or another. Often this was related to the poorly developed bank system: people did not trust the banks and kept their money at home, and those who trusted the banks lost this faith together with their money in the hyperinflation of August 1998. In addition, the real estate market was infested with criminality. Gangsters extorted flats by force from lonely and vulnerable people, and real estate agents became notorious for cheating their clients, frequently with the help of corrupt bureaucrats. The eroded legal system did not provide much support, but towards the end of the decade such criminality was drastically reduced by legal changes and an increased self-organization of the real estate business (Ambrose et al, 1998; Højdestrand, 2009).

About 20 percent of my informants were homeless for the abovementioned reasons. To a certain extent they overlapped with a category of the same proportion that may be called “victims of family conflicts.” Given the notoriously and chronically crammed living conditions, I assume

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<sup>7</sup> After year 2000, the Russian economic upswing has resulted in a flow of guest workers from, in particular, Central Asia, whose precarious working situation and ambiguous legal status make them extremely socially vulnerable, in particular after the onset of the economic crisis year 2008. It is very likely that many such persons end up as blatantly “roofless”, but I am not sure to what extent they are visible in the statistics and more research is urgently needed to cast light on their bleak situation.

that domestic disagreements made many a person “roofless” in the Soviet time too. The proliferating poverty during the transition to market economy put additional pressure on intimate networks, however, as ingrained expectations on mutual support clashed with poverty and new social distinctions. I knew people who had been literally thrown out by family members, or had left them voluntarily because of perennial abuse and quarrels. Some of them still had a propiska, while others had been cheated of their legal rights to their living space by their relatives.

Until the very end of the decade, the state continued to ignore the vast numbers of citizens “without a specific place of residence” and no federal programs for public support appeared for this semi-invisible social category.<sup>8</sup>

### **SURVIVAL – CHARITY AND REFUSE**

In the early transition phase, there were no forms of social support at all for the growing homeless population. All existing social services were dependent on the propiska, and no new solutions were created for a social problem that until recently had been officially non-existent. As in the Soviet time, state discourse as well as public consciousness interpreted “vagrancy” as an individual moral flaw, and directed their attention to social problems that befell the presumably “deserving” poor. Over time, a limited range of charities appeared. In St. Petersburg of the late 1990s, there were no shelters providing a bed for the night, but Caritas and the Salvation Army ran soup kitchens for the homeless and distributed clothes. Médecins Sans Frontières provided emergency medical care, and a deal between a local NGO, Nochlezhka, and the city was supposed to ensure hospital care for people registered as BOMZh at the NGO, although the practical outcomes of this arrangement varied.

As in many Western countries, support for the homeless was thus limited to “faith based” charity. The important distinction is that in most Western cases, a previously existing system of public support has gradually been replaced by faith-based charity (e.g. Hackworth, 2010), while in Russia “aid as a civil right” had never existed in the first place. And although various forms of support were gradually introduced by many local administrations during the late 1990s, such

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<sup>8</sup> In 1999, Médecins sans Frontières estimated that some 3 million Russian citizens (about 2% of the population) did not have a propiska, while the St. Petersburg NGO Nochlezhka thought the local number to be between 50,000 and 200,000 (thus constituting from 1% to 4% of the population). According to the same organizations in 2002, the number of “literally roofless” people in St Petersburg was about 9,000, but I have no idea how this number was estimated.

measures were utterly insufficient, even in theory. In 1998, for instance, St. Petersburg's city administration introduced a system of registration of homeless people entitling applicants to full medical insurance and to pensions. Such interventions were nonetheless targeted exclusively at those whose last propiska was in St. Petersburg. As a result, it did neither apply to migrants nor did it provide what people needed most: a work permit and a roof over their head.

The homeless were consequently largely left to fend for themselves, but so was, in essence, the entire population. Civil rights, work permits, social insurances, and so forth matter less when the "formal" dimensions of society are crumbling, and in these years more or less everybody compensated meager official incomes with unofficial economic practices, whether working off the books, cheating tax inspections, bribery, or even more blatant expressions of criminality. The most important asset was having advantageous social connections and thus the essential dilemma for homeless people was not the lack of official documents per se inasmuch as their lack of effective social capital. Nonetheless they were not entirely excluded from the ubiquitous webs of informal relationships and practices; rather, they occupied the most marginal positions, as human "leftovers" surviving from other leftovers.

The resulting "refuse economy", as I would call it, is constituted by objects and tasks that others do not want. It may be a solitary endeavor as well as a social one, depending on whether access to the leftovers from others is open or determined by negotiations and return favors. One decade ago, St. Petersburg provided plenty of free access to waste. Every backyard had a large, open trashcan, and around the city there were deposit stations paying refunds for deposit glass and metal. The bulk of the refuse economy was empty beer bottles, always in plenty since drinking in the streets was a very popular pastime. There were homeless people who gathered bottles alone all day and avoided homeless hangouts, but many others preferred to optimize the options for scavenging by congregating in places that generated things and tasks that others did not want.

In St. Petersburg, there used to be plenty of such potentially profitable hangouts. The railway stations were the most notorious ones, but at any site where petty, unpretentious commerce took place, a crew of homeless people survived on the margins of other activities. To a large extent they did so by working up "good relations", as they put it, with people who were working at these sites, offering them some sort of service. I call it "self-invented micro entrepreneurship" since it was the worker who took the initiative by finding a way to be useful to

someone else. At outdoor markets, for example, homeless people would offer themselves to unload trucks and put up stalls. If a good relationship was established with the salespeople, they could count on a steady income and even if it was meager it left most of the day free for other ways of making money.

### **REFUSE AND RAILWAYS**

A more specific example is the Moscow Station, St. Petersburg's main railroad station. In 1999, a policeman told me that more than a hundred "bomzhi" were hanging out there, but he may have referred also to "station regulars" who had places to live and who worked at the station in the same fashion as the homeless did, or just went there to drink. Among the regulars were also poor pensioners collecting bottles on the premises as well as prostitutes offering their services. The main "hang-out" was a long yard alongside the main building with an abundance of small kiosks and cafés providing alcohol, fast food, groceries, or pharmaceuticals. Kiosks selling beverages had high tables outside, against which people were leaning while drinking their beers. The cafes were small, clean but a bit faded, and distinctly Soviet in design and supply. The menu included simple dishes such as soups, pirogues, *pel'menie* (dumplings), and, in particular, a large selection of beers, vodka, and *koniak*.

Raia, a 55-year-old homeless woman, had been working for these cafés and kiosks since 1991 after thirty years of transitioning between prison and homelessness. She had the same deal everywhere: for cleaning and clearing the tables, the staff gave her a monopoly on the deposit bottles left at the tables. The ample beer consumption at the station considered, she usually made well enough to feed herself and keep herself clean and tidy, but at times she complemented these incomes with other activities. Many station regulars cleaned train wagons, a job that should be performed by the *provodnik*, an attendant in each wagon who is responsible for everything from ticket inspection to serving tea and cleaning. However, the provodnik would usually sell enough alcohol on the side during the journey to be able to pay someone else to clean up afterwards. Occasionally, Raia, like other station regulars, also washed cars in a makeshift parking lot adjacent to the station. Others assisted travelers with their luggage, or took over the job from the regular cleaners from the station when these wanted a break and a drink. In essence, all garbage at the station was handled by homeless people.

Fundamental for this “refuse economy” was the consumption of alcohol. Travelers customarily had a drink with their friends before departing and after arriving; ordinary townspeople used the station as a local bar; and in addition the employees at the station frequently had a drink after or even during work. Drinking was not limited to places where beer was sold, but took place in the open station yard and at the platforms too. The homeless made a profit from the bottles, but also from the good moods that drinking sometimes produces. They would explicitly ask tipsy travelers for “a ruble to a drink”, alluding to a culturally ingrained notion that all drinkers are potential soulmates who should never deny each other the blessings of a slight intoxication. The idea is particularly salient in Russia, although drinkers all over the world probably recognize it, and it frequently worked. A clique of station regulars would pool their money and even buy solvents such as face tonic at the kiosks, which they mixed with tap water in a plastic bottle and passed around.

Overt drunkenness, however, quite often resulted in a three-hour stay in the police precinct. A special police squad had the task of upholding order at the station based on an ordinance permitting them to take overtly drunken people into three hours of custody. Many of the homeless were regulars here too. They were hard drinkers, but they were also more likely than others to be detained since they were by definition “violating the passport laws” and thereby liable to being fined. Everybody, including staff, railway authorities, travelers and the police complained about the presence of “bomzhi” at the station, but there were no explicit laws against loitering at railway stations per se as one police officer told me with some regret in his voice. The homeless were kept at bay by random detentions and additional harassments such as being forced to pay tribute to the police, or being deprived of their money or even being physically abused when being detained in the precinct. (This, I should add, may happen to anyone who is taken into police custody in Russia, homeless or not.) Still there was little that the police could do against their collective presence at the station.

### **SPATIAL AMBIGUITY AND REFUSE**

A “refuse economy” of this kind presupposes certain qualities of space. Raia’s work at the cafes was possible only because it took place in an environment where poverty and traces of a hard life were not seen as an abomination. Neoliberal spatial regulation aims at concealing, expelling, and containing poverty (e.g., Wright, 1997), but in St. Petersburg of the late 1990s, there was no

possibility of hiding or segregating destitution and want. Wealth was displayed alongside poverty, inside apartment blocs as well as in the streets, and even people who were not homeless compensated small or non-existent incomes with deposit bottles (e.g., Caldwell, 2005). There were enough other poor people for the homeless not to be noticed and to essentially blend in; I, for example, would have recognized only a fourth of my informants as “homeless” had I not known about their housing status beforehand. Many of the clients and employees at Raia’s workplaces showed traces of a hard life too, and frequently they dressed even more humbly than Raia who always took pride in wearing clean and neat clothes. Her mere presence at the cafes was not a problem to anyone, which was obviously fundamental for her ability to strike deals with the staff about cleaning and collecting left over bottles.

Homeless people also benefited from places that offer some makeshift privacy. In this sense railway stations are optimal, because, to a certain extent, travelers have the same needs as homeless people. Moreover, many long-distance trains in Russia depart only once or twice a week, and changing trains may thus be a lengthy business involving spending a few nights at a railway station. At the Moscow Station, the ordinary waiting halls remained closed late at night, but there were rooms to rent for the night alongside a waiting hall where one could sit throughout the night for the humble fee of three rubles (then equal to three empty beer bottles). So while station regulars were usually chased out from other waiting halls, they were left alone in the capacity of paying guests, with the effect that dozens of homeless people used this hall as a regular sleeping place. Raia did not; as (in her own words) an incurable alcoholic, she was always too drunk late at night to be allowed in. Instead, she had “good relations” with the attendants of the public washroom, which was as crucial to station regulars as to travelers, regardless of sex. The washrooms were a hideout from the police, the only place nearby where personal hygiene could be maintained, and, for some, also serving as a sleeping place. Raia used to sleep in one of the toilet booths, curled up beside the hole in the floor.

Moreover, the station area was permeated by nooks and crannies with no apparent use at all. Wright (1997) has called such niches “refuse space” referring to the seemingly forgotten and unused sites where human “leftovers” such as homeless people can hide out without being in the way of someone. The opposite, “prime space”, is in some way is significant for the “housed”

society (Snow and Anderson 1993).<sup>9</sup> A general tendency in contemporary metropolises is that city authorities try to purge “prime space” of traces of poverty in general and the presence of homeless people in particular by making it generally inaccessible and difficult for them to use. This strategy implies increasing surveillance, and many researchers argue that the homeless are categorically being criminalized due to a proliferation of (usually local) laws and policies prohibiting behavior that a homeless person can hardly avoid, such as sitting on pavements, sleeping in parks, loitering, camping, and panhandling (Amster, 2003; Mitchell and Heynen, 2009; Berti, 2010; Sylvestre, 2010). The eradication of presumed deviance is also achieved by a redesignation of public space as private and semi-private (Doherty et al., 2008), which involves a meticulous appropriation of refuse space by commercial interests and public agencies. The paradoxical result is that homeless people are compelled to spend *more* time in prime space since they have nowhere else to go (Wright, 1997; Snow and Mulcahy, 2001; Amster, 2003).

In contrast, St. Petersburg of the late 1990s was infused with refuse space, and so was the Moscow Station, which added to the problems for the police to keep the place free from bomzhi and other undesirables. There were plenty of secluded spots where one could retire or even sleep, or even spend a few hours with a drinking gang without being chased away. A tunnel beneath the station was open but largely unused, and the backsides of kiosks and cafés were somewhat screened off from the yard. There was also a large abandoned building site nearby conveniently concealed by a half-demolished wall that the homeless were utilizing. Moreover, in the immediate proximity of the station was the maze of backyards so typical of St. Petersburg with apartment blocs where most homeless station regulars used to sleep. Front doors were generally open, and so were basements and attics. The former were frequently flooded (the city is built on a swamp), but there were frequently dry and warm boiler rooms which despite often being dirty and dilapidated constituted the most coveted sleeping places. Attics were empty and unused too, but often too cold in the wintertime. The landings outside were, in contrast, considered to be good sleeping places since nobody went there. “Good,” of course, is a relative concept because no such hideout was entirely safe. People were physically abused or even murdered there

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<sup>9</sup> Wright (1997) juxtaposes “refuse space” with “leisure space”, spaces for consumption and relaxation, and “functional space” used for some sort of transport. I see no analytical point in his distinction since the two kinds of space do not differ from the vantage point of the homeless. Snow and Anderson (1993) contrast “prime space” with “marginal space”, but I find Wright’s term “refuse space” more suitable since it does not imply geographical marginality – on the contrary refuse space is situated in the heart of the city, although it is neglected and regarded as insignificant.

supposedly by “fascist” youth gangs with the ambition to keep the city clean from anyone they did not like including bomzhi; people of color, or homosexuals. Irritated residents or janitors did not pose mortal danger but they frequently rid themselves of unwelcome night lodgers by simply throwing them out. Nonetheless “good relations” could sometimes be established with these actors too but establishing such relationships was more difficult than in the sphere of work since there were few return favors to offer. The only feasible one was basically the assurance that you are a better choice than the drunken and lice-infected bomzh who will turn up if nobody else occupies the place – sometimes this argument *was* indeed good enough, at least for those who managed to convince the “gatekeepers” that they were sober and orderly people.

### **A NEW SPATIAL REGIME**

Raia worked in all cafes at the station, with one exception – a renovated café that in many ways was a harbinger of the changes that came with a new spatial regime. “They made it fancy, you know”, she said with a sneer, “*evroremont* and all that, so of course *we* can’t work there any longer.” *Evroremont* means “renovation to European standards”, and in 1998, this one café had undergone such a luxurious top to bottom renovation. After the renovation the mismatch was apparently obvious: Raia, a stooped, half-sober, and toothless woman in her late fifties, did not match the new interior design of the café and its intended middle-class clientele, so she had to go. Further renovations were on their way, but they were postponed because of economic crisis of 1998 and for a few more years Raia and the others could continue to work as usual. But the renovation of this first café was a clear indication of worse things to come, at least for the station regulars.

Following the crisis and in the years after 2000, the refurbishments were in full swing again and the implicit rules for the use of urban space - the spatial regime - changed fundamentally. At the Moscow Station, empty lots outdoors were replaced with fenced and guarded parking lots, new residential buildings filled up the formerly abandoned building sites in the station’s vicinity, the tunnels beneath the station were locked up, and all formerly forgotten “holes” were filled with new kiosks. The cafes and kiosks in the yard were replaced with “European standard” restaurants and fast-food places, all with an interior design that effectively excludes homeless table-cleaners. The sale and consumption of alcohol was regulated so that beer was on sale only in the cafes for a higher price, and in 2007 drinking in public was prohibited everywhere, in the streets as well as



at railway stations. Although this might very well be the most violated legislation since the “dry laws” of Gorbachev, it is still relatively easy to make people respect it in a constricted space like a railway station, particularly since the updating of the station also included an enlarged and more efficiently organized police and security force. Its main objective supposedly was to prevent terrorism, but between the perpetual check-ups of anyone who appeared to originate in the Caucasus, there was plenty of opportunity for the policemen to get rid of purported bomzhi and make sure that no bottles were emptied outdoors.

Just in time for the 300-year anniversary of St. Petersburg in 2003, the Moscow Station had been transformed in its entirety and all the station regulars were gone. The makeover was not limited to the Station alone, but was part and parcel of a very thorough restoration of public space in general, which was made possible by the economic upswing and the recentralization of state power during the Putin era. For the winners of the economic restructuring, the remaining “leftovers” of low Soviet quality and the misery and decay of Yeltsin’s time were finally effectively dealt with, and the new shopping malls promised a bright future “to European standards.” Imperial facades regained their former glory as they received new paint, the notoriously bumpy streets were repaved, and even the traffic lights worked. The central city was once again something to be proud of and therefore not a hangout for beggars, bomzhi, and everything else that reminded the better-offs of the past.

In 2003, I was hoping that Raia and the others had relocated their survival strategies to outdoor markets and similar hangouts in the periphery of the city and I was convinced that there would still be stairways and basements in plenty for those who had no alternative. After a few more years, however, extensive renovation schemes, gentrification, a thorough commercialization of urban space, and increased surveillance had a profound effect on St. Petersburg in its entirety, not only the central parts. All the railway stations in the city were refurbished, and every outdoor market was replaced with fashionable shopping malls targeted at a new and considerably wealthier type of consumer than the moth-eaten “transitional” one. In addition, most apartment blocs are now protected against unwelcome night lodgers with efficient electronic locks, while the attics are gradually turned into trendy penthouses. Backyards are increasingly safeguarded from spatial misfits by wrought-iron gates, and today one can rarely criss-cross through the huge blocks via this maze of backyards that, as some homeless informant told me, was the reason why the Revolution of 1917 succeeded in the first place.

In effect, the income opportunities of homeless people have diminished radically. I was told by some old informants in 2005 that “more or less everybody,” men as well as women, worked at building sites. I do not know how accessible such jobs actually were, but during the Putin period the construction sector was indeed booming providing job opportunities that did not exist in 1999, the time of my fieldwork, because of the recession after the August 1998 crisis. Another, rather ironic side effect of these new job opportunities is that the homeless construction workers are literally “building themselves away” from the urban landscape, insofar that the projects that feed them are designed to improve security and protect against outsiders such as the homeless. The disappearance of sleeping places is symptomatic. As an activist engaged in homelessness told me in 2004, “the only bomzhi you see nowadays are really degenerated ones who have passed out in their own piss in the metro. And do you know why? Because they can’t get into the apartments blocs any longer, so they can’t sleep at night, and since they don’t sleep at night they can’t work in the day, and that’s why they degenerate.”<sup>10</sup> Logically, there should be refuse space left *somewhere* in a metropolis of this size, but the tendency is nonetheless worrying because there are still no public alternatives to attics and stairways. The Western shelter system with ‘a-bed-for-the-night’ is, to my knowledge, still non-existent in St Petersburg despite a few improvements. Since year 2000, for instance, the city has initiated municipal “rehabilitation centers” for the homeless in each local district, but they only serve those who once were registered in that very district. Consequently, the proportion of migrants among the homeless has grown considerably in large part because of the political and financial situation in the Russian peripheries and in neighboring countries, but also because of the dwindling number of ex-convicts and victims of real estate fraud among the total homeless population.

To this day, the Russian government is reluctant to acknowledge the existence of all these people. Homelessness is a disfiguring blemish on the face of any state, and the Soviet Union dealt with its physiognomic irregularities by simply ignoring the pimples. The few existing Soviet studies on “bomzhi” or “vagrants” were conducted by the Ministry of the Interior, i.e. the police authorities (Likhodei, 2003). After 1991 neither social research nor state authorities paid much attention to this particular social problem in the general tide of social calamities. Since 1998, however, federal attempts have been made to deal with the problem (usually expressed as

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<sup>10</sup> Private conversation with Igor Karlinsky, lawyer at the NGO Nochlezhka, in April 2004.

“vagrancy”) by legislation. A few draft laws have suggested anything form forced labor for “bomzhi” unwilling to work (Yulikova et al, 1997) to a federal registration similar to the local one in St. Petersburg, or the creation of a new system of “rehabilitation centers.”<sup>11</sup> Generally, the attitude has changed from an explicit “blaming-of-the-victim” and an open contempt of “bomzhi” and “vagrants”, to a more understanding approach (Höjdestrand 2009). Still the draft laws have been largely ineffective because they fail to discuss the main structuring device of contemporary Russian homelessness: the propiska system. This system continues to exclude the homeless from the official dimensions of society in the same way as undocumented international migrants are denied an official existence in the affluent parts of the world. Without a critical discussion about the cornerstone of Russian population management, I do not believe that the problem of homelessness can ever be adequately addressed.

As a compensation for the legal exclusion from society, the bardak, chaos of the transitional period provided homeless people with options to a makeshift social inclusion of a more practical kind. It may have deprived many people of a regular home and posed many risks for personal safety, but I do not think that Raia ever had lived or would live better than in the 1990s. She was included in a *de facto* network of socioeconomic relationships, even though she was positioned in its absolute margins together with the rest of the “leftovers.” The shared space – geographic as well as social and economic – was essential not only to her physical survival, but also to her sense of human dignity. Like most other homeless people I met, she based her self-esteem on her ability to take care of herself and not to parasite on others. This time is past, however, and I do not know where Raia is now. The present spatial regime simply does not open up for such makeshift inclusion, and I have no idea about how homeless people in St. Petersburg survive today. But one thing is for certain – not everybody is fit for construction work, and however cold, damp, and dangerous the old basements and stairways were, they were nonetheless better than no sleeping place at all. So while the recent revitalization may be a great improvement for many residents of St. Petersburg, it undoubtedly and in absence of any effective welfare arrangements created a host of new problems for the city’s most marginalized residents – the

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<sup>11</sup> In a draft law of 2007, the unintentionally homeless are distinguished from voluntary vagrants by their willingness to accept the treatment program of a planned system of rehabilitation centers. Those who refuse registration, medical treatment, professional training, and so forth are, it is suggested, to be subjected to incarceration and compulsory “work adaptation.” However, after a very negative response from NGOs and the influential Orthodox Church, this draft law was reformulated into a more humanistic variant lacking any mention of force or incarceration, which to my knowledge still is under preparation (c.f. <http://pomogi-bezdomnym.ru>).

homeless. For them, the future remains uncertain and it is up to researchers and administrators to learn more about this disturbing phenomenon in an attempt to create a more inclusive and just future in which the homeless are viewed as more than just refuse.

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