INTEGRATION & IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORA:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE AFGHAN REFUGEE COMMUNITY IN
ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the Afghan diaspora experience in St. Petersburg, Russia. Based on the testimonies of individual Afghan refugees residing in the city, it explores issues of adaptation, integration and identity among members of this community. Afghans arriving in an alien city are confronted with numerous challenges, from finding housing and employment and learning a new language, to creating space for their practice of Islam in a secular environment. Afghans employ various strategies to facilitate the acclimatization process including the utilization of existing networks of friends and family as well as the services offered by privately-funded organizations within the city.

The host society's attitude toward its immigrant communities is critical in affecting the latter's harmonious integration into the majority culture. While Russia, as a host society, has contributed to Afghans' lack of integration, many Afghans have made little effort to integrate thereby actively contributing to their alienation.

Beyond the initial adaptation and acclimatization processes, St. Petersburg's Afghans are renegotiating their identity as they are confronted with new ideas of the "other". This is a continual process which is contested and constructed on a daily basis through my informants' interactions with members of other minority groups, with the majority Russians, and with each other. In order to establish a place for themselves in the complex urban reality of St. Petersburg, Afghans' perceptions of themselves and of other communities shift to accommodate new diasporic ideas of identity.

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Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to my family: my parents, Albert and Laurie, and my sister, Jaime. Since early childhood, my parents have instilled in me the value of knowledge and education, and constantly pushed me to read more, learn more, and do my best. My accomplishments made them proud and they never hesitated to let me know just how proud of me they were. I am only where I am now because of their love, encouragement, and belief in me. Jaime, the most disciplined, serious, and industrious student I know, has been a continual source of inspiration for me. No one works harder than her, and she has been the model for the type of person I want to be. Further, she is a thoughtful and caring sister, the best sibling I could have asked for. I wish to dedicate this thesis to my family as it exists only because of them.

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Glossary

- chernye* - Derogatory Russian term for people with dark complexions, usually Caucasians or Central Asians. Literally means “blacks”.
- chernofobia* - Fear of “blacks”
- gulyat’* - Colloquial Russian term for partying, going out and having a good time, walking around aimlessly with friends, or a combination of any of the above activities. Term is a legacy of the Soviet Union. Can also mean “to sleep around”. Literally means “to walk around”.
- obshchezhitie* - Dormitory
- torgovets* - Vendor/trader
- militsionery* - Russian police officers. Literally “militiamen”.
- Rossiiskii* - Russian, but in the sense of ethnically Russian. Of Russia, as in “citizen of Russia”.
- chadari* - Form of *hijab* typically worn by Afghan women. It covers the hair but is not pinned at the chin; instead it is draped across the neck and over the shoulder so that wisps of hair are usually visible. Dari word.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, several waves of Afghan refugees have arrived in St. Petersburg. Fleeing political and economic upheaval in their homeland, these Afghans are faced with the renegotiation and redefinition of both the public and private spheres of their lives. They must find housing and employment, learn a new language, network, educate their children, and adapt their practice of Islam to a non-Muslim environment. Throughout this, these refugees must attain a balance between preserving what they consider to be essential to their identities and lifestyles, and integrating into their new surroundings. In many cases, existing networks of family and friends who have either migrated during Soviet times or after the collapse facilitate their integration process. Indeed, the existence of these networks is likely a primary factor in their decision to come to St. Petersburg. Others, however, may have no such networks to aid them upon their arrival. They rely on privately-funded organizations who offer services to refugees in St. Petersburg. In either case, the integration process is a complicated one and their experiences with each other, with other Muslim groups, with the Russian public, and with federal and municipal authorities will all help determine the level of integration they are able to achieve.

This thesis is an attempt to illustrate the complexities of the Afghan diaspora experience in one of Russia's major cities. It provides a nuanced analysis of the factors at work in the acclimatization and integration process of immigrants to their new environment. My study weaves together themes of identity, adaptation and integration

among diaspora Afghans. In it, I examine the importance of the everyday life of Afghan refugees as they navigate an alien city and culture. Taking as their starting point the work of Michel de Certeau, many scholars have recently recognized the importance of examining everyday life practices as a subject in and of itself.¹ However, the unique way in which immigrant and refugee communities experience everyday life in their new surroundings has largely been neglected. This thesis will therefore attempt to fill this gap by examining the everyday life practices of recent Afghan refugees as they adapt to their new environment.

One of the main arguments of this thesis is that the host society is the determining factor of the level and type of integration that an immigrant community is able to achieve. My study tests this hypothesis in a post-communist context. I argue that Russian attitudes towards Muslims critically affect both the integration and religious adaptation of St. Petersburg's Afghans. One of my objectives is to examine to what extent members of the Afghan diaspora in St. Petersburg perceive that the nature of integration they have been able to achieve is contingent upon the attitudes of the host society towards them. In her in-depth study of Somali communities in London and Toronto, Rima Berns McGown argues that despite the importance of the host society's role in affecting integration, it is an aspect of migration which has been little examined and largely misunderstood. The nature of the integration process – to the extent that it is harmonious or stilted – is largely determined by the political culture of the host society.² The process of integration is particularly significant when the immigrant community has a framework of values and

¹ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. xi. See for example Mines and Lamb: 2002, Bowen and Early: 2002.

² Rima Berns McGowan. *Muslims in the Diaspora: the Somali Communities of London and Toronto*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 4-7

traditions that appears to differ widely from that of the host society. This is the case with recent Afghan immigrants in Russia.

Although there have been few studies done on Muslim diaspora communities in post-communist Russia, my study will connect with the significant body of literature on Islamic diasporas in other parts of Europe and North America. It will focus on the creation of community and the recreation of identity among recent Afghan immigrants. Afghans have different national, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds than do other Muslims from Central Asia or the Caucasus in St. Petersburg. The common thread holding them together is their belief in Islam and their experiences as newcomers in a foreign city. Is this enough for members of these various groups to cross the soft borders of ethnicity, nationality and language and form a single community? Or is it more beneficial to study them as separate and unique communities? Barbara Daly Metcalfe, in her study of the construction and negotiation of Muslim space in Western Europe and North America, argues that despite the variety of these Muslim groups – South Asians, Africans, Arabs, Turks and African-American converts – “their shared experiences have produced some commonalities in their engagement with the Islamic tradition and their modalities of creating late twentieth-century communities” that would suggest the appropriateness of studying this diaspora as a “single phenomenon.”³ This would seem to imply that the saliency of Islam and the experience of building community in a foreign environment overshadow other aspects of identity such as culture, life experience, kinship association or socioeconomic status. The testimonies of my informants is evidence of the fact that, at least among the Afghan diaspora, Daly Metcalf’s view of

³ Barbara Daly Metcalfe, ed. *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

identity is too simplistic; such an approach places too much emphasis on the saliency of Islam as the prime factor of identity and may, as a result, mute other aspects of belonging to a certain community. My research explores these complex issues and contributes to the existing body of literature on Muslim diaspora identity formation.

In order to research this community, I conducted intensive ethnographic fieldwork in St. Petersburg. I obtained the testimonies of Afghan refugees through a series of in-depth interviews and intensive participant observation. The field work was conducted in St. Petersburg over the course of three months in summer 2004 and for an additional month in January 2005. The semi-structured interviews were between one and two hours long and were composed of a series of open-ended questions. Some of my richest material, however, came not from these interviews but from my daily conversations and interactions with members of this community.

My approach to my research and the methodology I employ in gathering data are influenced by the postmodernist trend in anthropology. Anthropology, in the past few decades, has undergone a revision whose most important manifestation is the self-reflexivity of ethnographers. Ethnographers have had to confront and come to terms with certain paradoxes within the discipline that stem from the unique reality created by the confluence of both researcher and informant in the field. Clifford Geertz has advocated that anthropology is an interpretive quest in which the ethnographer is an author rather than a positivist scientist⁴. The goal of anthropology should be, therefore, not the recording of facts but the understanding of culture through interpretation; there are no

⁴ Clifford Geertz. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. Also see Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

facts, but merely ethnographers' interpretations.⁵ As a result, ethnography must be the product of the anthropologist as creator and influencer rather than simply as observer and recorder. Anthropologist Judith Stacey argues that ethnography is not "cultural reportage" but "cultural construction, and always a construction of self as well as of the other"⁶. In other words, the researcher must recognize and acknowledge that his/her presence has an effect on the community studied, and influences the dialogue as it is taking place, as well as actions as they are being performed. Empiricism is never completely possible or appropriate in the study of social phenomena.

Geertz argues that it is actually preferable for a researcher to become involved with those s/he is researching. He does not mean by this that, as ethnographers, we must abandon the quest for factual knowledge; obviously there are events in the field which are "facts". If there is a drought lasting several months and as a result 100 people die of starvation or dehydration then the ethnographer has a moral and professional obligation to report that 100 and not 10 people died. However, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues, and Geertz would no doubt agree, all facts are selected and interpreted as soon as the ethnographer decides to focus on one thing and ignore another, or to engage this person in conversation but not that one, or to attend one ceremony but not another, "so that anthropological understanding is necessarily partial and is always hermeneutic".⁷ Reflexivity in anthropology acknowledges the inevitability of the researcher's personality, values, upbringing, and beliefs influencing the results of fieldwork as much as those studied themselves influence that end result.

⁵ Ibid, 1973.

⁶ Judith Stacey. "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol.11 (1), 24

⁷ Nancy Scheper-Hughes. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 23

In keeping with the reflexive trend, I have entered my research with this awareness and, in order to be as transparent as possible, I make explicit within the text how I obtained information and what factors may have influenced information to which I had access. My practice is modeled on the work of anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes. In her ethnography *Death without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992) she eloquently exposes the ways in which she obtains knowledge, works in the field, and challenges the views of the members of the community studied just as they challenge her own views. Indeed, she states that one of her goals in writing ethnography is to “give the reader a deeper appreciation of the way in which ethnographic ‘facts’ are built up in the course of everyday participation in the life of the community. In this way the reader should be in a better position to evaluate the claims made and the conclusions drawn. My study exposes the nature of my relationship with each informant, and my goals are made clear throughout the text.

My relationship with some of my Afghan informants began in the autumn of 2001 when I worked as a volunteer at the kindergarten and women’s centre of the St. Petersburg Red Cross. For six months I visited the space on a daily basis and developed friendships with some of the women and their children. My willingness to devote my time to their community earned me their trust and their friendship as well as numerous invites to their homes for delicious Afghan meals. Several of the women shared their feelings with me about life in St. Petersburg. I learned that, beyond the usual challenges of adapting to life in a foreign environment, of learning a new language, of establishing a balance between the values of one’s own culture and those of the majority culture, Afghans in St. Petersburg were confronted with what they perceived to be the hostility of

the host society to their presence on Russian soil. This attitude complicated their adaptation and integration process. I compared my Afghan friends' anecdotes of their experiences in the diaspora with the experiences of immigrants I knew while growing up in Montreal; and became convinced that the host society must play a key role in the adaptation and integration process of immigrants. This was the spark that ignited my interest in studying the Afghan refugee community in St. Petersburg. Two years after leaving St. Petersburg for the first time, I was given the opportunity to return and realize my research idea.

Collecting data for this project presented me with significant challenges, some of which I had difficulty overcoming. This resulted in certain weaknesses in my research, mainly involving language. I left for St. Petersburg in May, 2004, armed with a set of interview questions and a digital voice recorder. My purpose was to conduct and record approximately 25 in-depth interviews over the course of the summer. I returned to the Red Cross kindergarten and solicited women who were interested in participating in the project. I once again assumed my role as volunteer at the kindergarten and, in this capacity, became acquainted with many Afghan women who I had either not known before, or known only superficially. In this way I made my project known to all the women who frequented the Red Cross space, as well as their husbands. Although finding participants who were willing to be interviewed was quite simple, interviewing them was very challenging.

First, I was required to record most of the interviews by hand. I quickly discovered that the digital voice recorder was useful only as a favourite plaything for the numerous young children of my Afghan respondents. Most respondents were quite

reluctant to have their interviews tape-recorded. Some women feared that other members of their tight-knit community might happen upon the voice recorder and hear disparaging remarks about themselves or their husbands during an interview. The reluctance to be tape-recorded was not unique to my sample of Afghans. Indeed, Afghan scholar Maliha Zulfacar, who conducted interviews with Afghans in the USA and Germany, claims that most of her respondents expressed a desire not to have the interviews tape-recorded. She argues that their reluctance stems from the fact that Afghans are a very private people and are hesitant to share their personal lives with outsiders.⁸ Whatever the reason for their desire to have the interviews recorded by hand, I complied. I realized that recording two-hour-long interviews by hand word for word is a tremendous challenge, especially when doing so in Russian. As a result, I was sometimes required to translate testimonies on the spot so as to be able to record them quickly. Slight nuances in language and word choice may have been lost in the process, but I did my best to ensure that I kept the original Russian expressions whenever possible. I have therefore been able to convey the words of my respondents insofar as I understood them when they were spoken to me.

Second, although I may have properly conveyed what my respondents were telling me, there is no guarantee that they themselves always had the correct Russian words or expressions. The fact that Russian is not my first language was less of an obstacle than the fact that it is not that of my respondents either. Many times in our interviews, and even in our daily conversations, I was acutely aware of instances when some of my Afghan informants were unable to relate to me certain anecdotes, emotions or events because they lacked the Russian vocabulary and fluency needed to do so. I

⁸ Maliha Zulfacar. *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany: a Comparative Analysis of the Use of Social Capital*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1997, p. 51

often probed them, hoping to get at least the basic idea of what they wished to convey, but many times they would just give up, frustrated by their inability to express themselves, and brush the issue aside with “never mind, it’s not important”. Seeing their frustration, I did not press the issue. I am aware that my inability to speak the first language of my informants is the main weakness of this project.

Some Afghans had a nearly fluent command of Russian, however, and, as such, they became my key informants. The testimonies and insights of my key male informants, Katar, Fardin, and Arifat, and of my key female informants, Neba, Faribo, and Hala, comprise some of the richest material of my study.⁹ I had originally intended to focus solely on the experiences of Afghan women in St. Petersburg since it was with the women that I had developed close relationships rather than with their husbands. However, Afghan men, through their daily interactions with Russians at their place of work, tended to have a better command of Russian than did their wives, with some notable exceptions. The men proved to be forthright and candid informants who provided me with very interesting material. Afghan women were nonetheless invaluable in their capacity as informants; particularly Neba and Faribo, who, having come to the Soviet Union as international students, were fluent in Russian. Their language proficiency, as well as their familiarity with the city, singled them out as the most prolific and informative of my women respondents. Interestingly, Hala was least proficient in Russian of all the women, and the most recent arrival in St. Petersburg. However, having received an education in Pakistan, she knew basic English and I was therefore able to obtain the perspective of an Afghan who was still in the initial stages of adaptation to her new life. My key informants, therefore, came from fairly diverse backgrounds and were

⁹ All names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

at different stages of the adaptation process, which provided me with a more nuanced perspective of the community.

The backgrounds of my informants are not homogeneous. Although they all immigrated to St. Petersburg from Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, their ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic status differ significantly. A true appreciation of the reality Afghans face in St. Petersburg, therefore, requires a brief sketch of what they left behind in their homeland and the circumstances which led to their departure.

Afghanistan is a small, land-locked country which borders the Central Asian countries Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, Iran to the west, China to the far north-east, and Pakistan to the south and east. Bisected by the rugged Hindu Kush mountain range, Afghanistan has some of the most forbidding and inhospitable terrain in the world. Further, the country has been the site of frequent conflict; the Afghan people resisted colonization by both Russian and British empires and, finally, achieved their independence after the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919.¹⁰ However, the country continued to act as a buffer zone, this time ideologically, between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War.¹¹ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978 and subsequent occupation caused the outbreak of a civil war that would ravage the country over the next decade and a half, scattering millions of Afghan refugees around the world.

Afghanistan has rightly been termed a "nation of minorities", for no ethnic group comprises more than 50 percent of the population. The country is composed of Pashtuns,

¹⁰ Larry Goodson. "The Fragmentation of Culture in Afghanistan" in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 18 Post-Colonial Discourse in South Asia/Khitab Ma Bad al-Kuluniyalayah fi Junub Asya, 1998, p. 270

¹¹ Nassim Jawad. *Afghanistan: a Nation of Minorities*. Minority Rights Group International Report, Feb. 1992, p. 7

Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen, Nuristanis, Panjsheris, Baluchis and Brahuis, and Aimaq.¹² Small minorities of Jews and Punjabi Hindus also reside in the urban centres of Kabul, Herat and Qandahar.¹³ Estimates of Afghanistan's total population range from 18 million to nearly 30 million, of which around 95% subscribe to the Islamic faith.¹⁴ Of the total inhabitants of Afghanistan, roughly 40% belong to the dominant minority group, the Pashtuns.¹⁵ They are Sunni Muslims who speak Pashto (an Indo-European language of the Iranian group) and they inhabit east, south, and south-western areas of the country, mostly along the Pakistani border. The term "Afghan" was originally applied exclusively to the Pashtuns before it became used to denote any inhabitant of the land of Afghanistan.¹⁶ The Pashtuns are the largest remaining tribally organized society in the world.¹⁷ Their social structure is based on the *Pashtunwali* code which requires the speaking of Pashto and an adherence to customs revolving around the preservation of honour, hospitality, and a reliance on the *jirga* (tribal council) for conflict resolution and decision-making. Afghan historian Nassim Jawad argues that powerful and charismatic leaders have divided the Pashtuns into numerous tribes and sub-tribes, so that it is difficult even to speak of a common Pashtun identity; rather, each sub-tribe, isolated within its own boundaries, is loyal to its own leaders and kinship structures. Therefore,

¹² Jawad, p. 11-13

¹³ M.R. Arunova, ed. *Demokraticheskaya Respublika Afganistan*. Moskva: Akademia Nauk CCCP, 1981, p. 10

¹⁴ Jawad, p. 6; CIA World Factbook. <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html>, accessed June 3rd, 2005, Arunova, p. 9

¹⁵ This percentage is the estimate after the mass exodus of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan since the 1980's. Pre-1978 they accounted for roughly 50% of the total population. (See M.R. Arunova, ed: 1981)

¹⁶ Donald N. Wilber. *Afghanistan: its People, its Society, its Culture*. New Haven, CN: HRAF Press, 1962, p. 39

¹⁷ Goodson, p. 271

despite their dominance in Afghan state affairs, Pashtuns do not form a homogeneous group, united in their support of all government policies.¹⁸

The Persian speaking Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising 25 to 30% of the total population. Physically, they tend to be fairer-skinned than the Pashtuns, and smaller in stature. They are mostly Sunni Muslims though some Shi'a Muslim Tajiks live in the west and also in Kabul. The majority of Tajiks are concentrated in the north-east – in and around the city of Herat – and in the west, and they are dominant in Kabul as well.¹⁹ Their Persian language – called Dari in Afghanistan – is distinguishable from the Farsi of Iran only by accent and some local word usage and expressions. Indeed, the Shi'a Muslim Tajiks in and around Herat are often known as Farsiwan (Persian speakers) rather than Tajiks.²⁰ Recently, however, the term Tajik has come to include all non-Pashtun, Persian-speaking people (Farsiwan) who inhabit Afghanistan,²¹ although I employ the term Persian when referring to my Dari-speaking informants.

The Tajiks form the majority of the educated elite and are considerably wealthier than other ethnic groups, including Pashtuns. Particularly in Kabul and Herat, they are politically influential with significant Tajik representation in government ministries, public services, and trade bodies.²² Donald Wilber calls the Tajiks “town-dwelling cultivators” and “skilled artisans and traders” who are the most influential group in Kabul.²³ The Tajiks, therefore, retain significant power through their wealth, their

¹⁸ Jawad, p. 11

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 11

²⁰ Barnett R. Rubin. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 30

²¹ Willem Vogelsang. *The Afghans*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p. 30

²² Jawad, p. 11

²³ Wilber, p. 45

education, their overrepresentation in the urban elite, and their language. In St. Petersburg, many Persians have become concerned with maintaining this status which they consider a significant aspect of Persian Afghan identity

All members of St. Petersburg's Afghan community with whom I had contact are either Pashtun or Tajik-Persian. The first Afghans, mainly Pashtuns, came to Soviet Leningrad as international students in the early 1980's, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. They left their homeland in order to escape the civil war that was ravaging the country and to obtain a degree in a promising and prestigious profession in the Soviet Union. Several remained in the city since their days as students but many returned to Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Those who returned were soon confronted with the unpleasant reality of life in Kabul following the coup which overthrew the Soviet-sponsored communist government in 1992. Beyond the massive destruction of both population and infrastructure caused by Soviet forces, rival militias and resistance groups responsible for the coup continued to engage in armed struggle, thus perpetuating Afghanistan's civil war. These groups of *mujahidin* (holy warriors) established themselves as warlords over the various regions of the country and terrorized the population by participating in rampages of rape, looting and murder.²⁴ Thousands of refugees fled the country for neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, but many who had previously lived in the former Soviet Union returned to Russia's major cities. They were joined by a number of Afghan refugees who had never before set foot on Russian soil, but saw the country as a better option than Pakistan or Iran. It was close to Western Europe, where some had relatives who had fled Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.

²⁴ http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan2/Afghan0701-01.htm#P184_37606, accessed June 6th, 2005

The violence of the *mujahidin* groups paved the way for the rise of the Taliban in 1996. The Taliban was composed of Afghan Islamists, primarily rural Pashtuns, who were disillusioned with the violence and chaos which had resulted from the *mujahidin* victory over the communist government. After the Taliban conquered Kabul, however, the former warring factions of the resistance groups merged forces and formed the Northern Alliance, whose purpose was to present a united front against the Taliban. With the Taliban in power, the civil war raged on.²⁵

The Taliban sought to protect women from the indiscriminate rape and attacks against them at the hands of the *mujahidin*. In order to do this, they claimed it necessary to restrict all women from attending work, except in the health care sector, or school. My female informants, all of whom were living in Kabul, were forced to quit their jobs and many spent days on end within the confines of their abodes. Further, men who demonstrated any form of opposition to the Taliban or their policies were in danger of persecution and execution.

The majority of my Afghan informants in St. Petersburg fled their homeland during the Taliban administration of the country. Many already had relatives or friends established in St. Petersburg and, although most claimed that they had hoped to join family in Western Europe or North America, Russia once again appeared to be more promising than Pakistan or Iran. By the late 1990's, most western countries were no longer accepting Afghan refugees as they had in the 1980's, when Afghans were fleeing communist aggression. As such, my informants had limited options. Conditions under the Taliban in Afghanistan were horrific for them and some of my male informants feared

²⁵ "The History of Afghanistan: the Civil War" <http://moesgaard.hum.au.dk/afghanistan/ie020704.html>, accessed June 7th, 2005

arrest and torture for anti-Taliban activities. Some had originally fled to Pakistan, but finding conditions there very difficult, they chose to try their lot in Russia. Although most did not have legal status to enter Russia, they packed their belongings and made the journey to St. Petersburg, where they joined their co-nationals in the city's burgeoning Afghan community.

The final and smallest wave of Afghan refugees to arrive in St. Petersburg was the result of the United States-led bombardment and occupation of Afghanistan in response to the September 11th World Trade Centre bombings in New York City. Two of my informants lost their homes during the air strike campaign against the country in late 2001, whose purpose was ostensibly to force the Taliban to surrender Osama Bin Laden for his apparent role in the terrorist attacks.²⁶ The U.S. presence on Afghan soil did little to pacify violent activity and many of my informants claim it actually intensified it. Some, who had stubbornly remained in Kabul throughout the years of civil war, finally capitulated and fled their homeland.

Despite the defeat of the Taliban, significant improvements in the lives of Afghans, especially women, have yet to be seen. Conditions in the country have not improved to the point where my informants could consider returning home. In many major cities, restrictions on women's participation in life outside the private sphere have been lifted. Yet Afghanistan remains a virtually lawless state, and so they cannot exercise their rights to participation in public life. The police force is inefficient and women's physical security is threatened on a daily basis. The assault and rape of women

²⁶ On the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, see: Symposium "Special Collection: Reflections on Cities, September 11th and the 'War on Terrorism'--One Year On" in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* vol. 26/3, September 2002, pp. 589-634; Rahul Mahajan. "The new crusade: America's war on terrorism" in *Monthly Review* (New York, N.Y.) vol. 53/9, February 2002, pp. 15-23

and young girls, particularly Pashtuns, is prevalent. Violence against ethnic Pashtuns has also become widespread, in an apparent attempt to make all Pashtuns pay for the crimes of the Pashtun Taliban regime.²⁷ The devastation of the country and of the economy has forced many Afghans to turn to poppy cultivation in order to earn a living.²⁸ Recent suicide bombings, kidnappings and riots have made Kabul just as dangerous as any other area of Afghanistan.²⁹ For many Afghans still living as refugees in countries around the world, including my informants in St. Petersburg, this is devastating news. Family members remaining in Afghanistan are still at risk for their physical safety. And the precarious situation in the country means that it will likely be many long years before refugees will be reunited with their families in their homeland. Since Afghans are likely to remain in St. Petersburg for some time, an examination of the life they have constructed for themselves there is not only appropriate, but necessary.

Each chapter explores the various strategies which members of this recent immigrant community employ to reconstruct their lives in the diaspora. Chapter One presents an examination of the initial challenges Afghans must overcome upon their arrival in St. Petersburg, such as finding employment and living accommodations. It focuses on the ways in which arriving Afghans use existing networks of friends and family in order to ease the burden of acclimatization. Chapter Two analyzes themes of identity and the fluidity of ethnic group boundaries. It explores the reconstruction and renegotiation of Afghan identity in the diaspora. As they are confronted with new ideas of the “other”, Afghans use stereotyping to help them to establish their place in the

²⁷ “Paying for the Taliban’s Crimes: Abuses Faced by Pashtuns” Human Rights Watch Report.

http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/afghan2/afghan0402-03.htm#P252_31336, accessed June 9th, 2005

²⁸ “Opium Production Spreading in Afghanistan” <http://opioids.com/afghanistan/opium-economy.html>, accessed June 10th, 2005

²⁹ “Afghanistan: Violence Surges” <http://www.rawa.org/may-hrw.htm>, accessed June 10th, 2005

complex social hierarchy of St. Petersburg. I argue that this is a continual process of negotiation which is contested and constructed on a daily basis as Afghans interact with each other, with members of other minority groups, and with the Russian majority. Their conceptions of both themselves and of members of other groups as well as the ways in which they manipulate the boundaries of their community illustrate the multilayered dynamics of power which characterize inter- and intra-group relationships.

In Chapter Three I argue that the host society plays a main role in the level of integration of an immigrant population. Taking as its starting point my argument that Russia is a host society which is relatively suspicious of its non-western minorities, the chapter examines the strategies used by the host society to isolate its minorities. Further, it explores the strategies used by Afghans to create a space in a city where they perceive themselves to be unwelcome. Finally it addresses Afghan perceptions of the degree to which the host society is responsible for their lack of integration and for the hardships that they face in St. Petersburg.

Finally, Chapter Four details the religious adaptation of St. Petersburg's Afghans and how attitudes of both the host society and of other Muslim minorities in the city can have a significant impact on this process of adaptation. Afghans are faced with the challenge of adapting their practice of Islam to a non-Muslim environment. Barbara Daly Metcalf argues that the main challenge facing Muslims in non-Muslim societies is the creation of space for Islam.³⁰ Afghans must create space, both physical and metaphorical, for their religious practice, as well as maintain a Muslim home and raise Muslim children in a largely secular society. This chapter examines not only the tools Afghans use to affect their religious adaptation, but also the ways in which the host

³⁰ Daly Metcalf, p. 6-20

society is able to facilitate that adaptation. It argues that Afghans are faced with the unique situation of adapting their religious practice not only alongside the Russian majority but also in consideration of St. Petersburg's former "Soviet" Muslims, who largely dictate the norms for Muslims within the city. The conclusion then provides a synthesis of the main arguments of the thesis, as well as advances ideas for further research on the diaspora experience.

CHAPTER ONE:

Confronting the Difficulties of Everyday Life in the Diaspora: An Examination of Afghans' Acclimatization Process

Afghan immigrants have found the adaptation and acclimatization process to their new surroundings very stressful. Many members of the diaspora in St. Petersburg are aided by existing networks of relatives and friends already established in the city. Among other forms of assistance, networks of support help newly-arrived Afghans find decent apartments and Afghan men establish themselves as traders rather than just employees in the market. Those with no support networks can nonetheless rely on resources provided by privately funded organizations like the Red Cross, the Afghan Cultural Centre (ACC) and the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees. The Afghan Cultural Centre provides a 'male space' for Afghans to interact with their peers, thereby fomenting ties within the community, and easing the burden of adaptation to St. Petersburg life. Women benefit from the services provided by the Red Cross women's centre; socializing with other Afghan women relieves feelings of loneliness and allows them to build up their own support networks with their co-nationals. The gender-specific nature of services offered by the Red Cross, the ACC, and the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees caters to the needs and the world view of Afghans. The willingness of organizations to adapt their services to fit the needs of the people they wish to help can greatly aid in the adaptation and acclimatization process of new immigrants.

A full understanding of what it means to be part of the Afghan diaspora living in St. Petersburg requires an examination of the daily challenges confronting each Afghan

in his/her new environment. Establishing oneself in a new city where one does not speak the majority language, nor have any familiarity with the customs of the majority culture is an overwhelming task that every new Afghan arrival in St. Petersburg must undertake. Each new arrival is faced with the task of finding living accommodations and employment, and of learning the local language. The practice of everyday life, including traveling on public transportation, shopping, and taking one's children to the doctor requires careful consideration and negotiation for newcomers. In addition to analyzing the importance of kin and community networks, this chapter will examine the everyday life of recent Afghan arrivals in St. Petersburg, beginning with the initial challenges of finding accommodations and employment. I will then move to a discussion of the daily challenges confronting these Afghans in their acclimatization process to St. Petersburg. While recent studies exist on the everyday practice of various communities worldwide, very little attention has been devoted to everyday life among diaspora and immigrant communities. This chapter will, therefore, address this critical issue, largely absent from diaspora literature.

Existing networks of friends and relatives already established in the city facilitate the initial process of finding living accommodations and employment, and of finding one's way around an unfamiliar city. Many of my informants had other relatives or friends already living in the city when they arrived. Many Afghans who had originally come to Soviet Leningrad as international students remained after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Further waves of Afghan refugees arrived in St. Petersburg both before and after the rise of the Taliban in 1996 with the most recent arrivals victims of the U.S.

bombing of Kabul beginning in the fall of 2001. A February 2004 presentation and roundtable discussion of the *Mezhvedomstvennaya Rabochaya Gruppya* (Interdepartmental Working Group) on “the problem of Afghans in the Russian Federation” stated that, as of 2003 nearly 150 000 Afghans lived in Russia. In St. Petersburg alone live between 2.5 and 4 thousand. Most of these are Kabul Afghans,

³¹ It can be assumed that many families arriving in the city were connected to Afghans who had previously fled their homeland for St. Petersburg. They used these networks to help them navigate their unfamiliar surroundings while gradually adapting to the city and establishing daily routines.

The initial challenge facing Afghans upon their arrival in St. Petersburg is the search for living accommodations. If new arrivals had relatives or friends in the city, they lodged with them until more permanent accommodations could be found. It was not uncommon for families to host newly-arrived relatives for up to a year in some cases while other living arrangements were being sought. This meant that many Afghans frequently lived in very crowded spaces while two families, often with three or more children each, occupied one small two- or three-room apartment. Saima and Oman, along with their two daughters and two sons, moved in with Oman’s brother and sister-in-law, and their three very young children upon the former family’s arrival in St. Petersburg in 1997. Momena and Vikar arrived in St. Petersburg with five children and Momena’s elderly mother in 1998 and were housed by Momena’s brother Nazar for several months. Her brother had been living in St. Petersburg since 1994 and working as

³¹ “Doklad, predstavlenyy MRG po sovershenstvovaniyu migratsionnogo zakonodatelstva i Krugly stol ekspertov po probleme afgantsev v RF” on 02.03.2004 <http://refugees.memo.ru/> 09.06.2004

an auto-repairman at a garage (*avtoremont*). He helped her and Vikar find their own apartment after several months of living with him and his family.

The existence of support networks is beneficial to new immigrants in their search for a more permanent residence. Beyond the task of housing their various relatives, Afghans already established in the city consider themselves responsible for finding permanent accommodations for their newly-arrived kin. The already-established Afghan men are the ones who locate apartments. Their Russian language skills, usually superior to those of their wives due to their more frequent interaction with Russian-speakers at work, make them better able to communicate with landlords. There is a cultural element to this as well; Afghans do not consider it appropriate for women to call unknown men on the phone and arrange to meet them to view an apartment.

Oman's brother, Dariush, searched for an affordable apartment for the family in his free time, but working seven days a week from 9am until 6pm did not leave him much opportunity for extensive apartment hunting. After nearly five months, Dariush found a decently-priced apartment for his brother's family and they have been living there now for eight years. I asked Dariush how he searched for an apartment for his brother's family. He replied that his first course of action was to spread the word at the market, where all of his fellow Afghans worked, that his newly-arrived brother was in need of an apartment. Then he checked the classified sections of the cheapest newspapers.³² He regularly consulted *Argumenty i Fakty* and *Na Dnem*, two of the most popular periodicals in St. Petersburg (the latter is a free weekly paper). Lastly, he would ask other Russian vendors (*torgovtsy*) at the market if they were aware of anyone who wanted to rent out an apartment. A Russian woman working at the market found the apartment for Oman and

³² Interview with Dariush at Oman's home, July 11th, 2004

his family; her sister-in-law's sister was trying to rent her apartment and it was decently priced.³³ The apartment was not large but it was bright and fairly well renovated and Oman and Saima were satisfied with it. It was located at Prospekt Prosveshentye metro station which was the last stop to the north of one of the metro lines, a good distance from the centre of the city (refer to the map of the St. Petersburg metro system below for an understanding of the layout of the city.) Even this apartment was initially unaffordable for Oman and Saima, who had used much of their savings to get from Kabul to St. Petersburg; as such, Dariush helped them pay their rent for several months until Oman became self-sufficient. Newly-arrived Afghans can, therefore, also benefit financially from existing kinship networks in the city.

The experiences of Afghans with already-established kin in St. Petersburg are hardly uniform. Not all Afghans are able to aid their newly-arrived kin financially. As such, some Afghan families are only able to procure barely-habitable apartments. Nazar, who works at an *avtoremont*, has a very modest income and could not offer Momena and Vikar any financial support. The apartment that he managed to find them was affordable for them because it was particularly shabby, cramped and dark. Vikar and Momena live in this tiny two-room apartment with their six children (the youngest of which was born in St. Petersburg) and with Momena's mother, Rana. Momena told me that she preferred spending time at the Red Cross women's centre than at home; at the kindergarten her five- and eight-year-old boys could run around and be rowdy while she sat comfortably drinking tea and chatting with her friends. At home, where they had no real furniture, they would sit on blankets and drink tea, as was traditionally done in Afghanistan, but the tiny space meant that the children were constantly in the way, often spilling teacups or

³³ Ibid.

kicking dirt into the food. I asked Momena how she felt about the apartment and she replied:

What's there to like about it? It's small and dirty and badly needs renovations. My children have no place to play and so they always disrupt our guests by running around and playing in the one small space they have which just happens to be where we are having our tea. I wish we could move, but how? We have no money for a better apartment. This one is cheap, so we stay here.³⁴

Despite the fact that the St. Petersburg periodical *Delovoi Peterburg* referred to them as “one of the absolute poorest peoples living in St. Petersburg”³⁵, there is considerable diversity in the economic status of Afghans in the city, and in the way that they use their support networks. While Momena and Vikar were likely among the poorest families in St. Petersburg, other families had more financial resources than this couple. Support networks, even in Moscow, were able to aid them logistically and financially. The two Afghan couples I interviewed with Moscow connections, Dina and Araf, and Hala and Fardin, were also the wealthiest of my informants and had procured particularly nice accommodations. Their mutual connection in Moscow was able to supply both families with their respective apartments in St. Petersburg. They rented their apartments from an Afghan landlord who resided in Moscow; the rent was reasonable because this rich Afghan man, they claimed, was happy to do his fellow nationals a favour by giving them a nice place to live. Although both Dina and Hala talked about their relative poverty, they had very large and modern apartments. Dina and Araf had no children but they nonetheless had a three room apartment which included a bedroom, a living room (almost unheard of in St. Petersburg except in the homes of the wealthy), and an office with a computer and internet access. However, they assured me that their

³⁴ Interview with Momena at her home, June 10th, 2004

³⁵ Polina Kozlovskaya. “Afgantsy Peterburga Kormiatsia Torgovlei” in *Delovoi Peterburg*, October 11th, 2001

monthly rent was quite inexpensive due to the generosity of their Moscow patron. Hala, Fardin and their three young children lived in a very well-maintained building which included a “security guard” – a Russian *babushka* who buzzed in guests – and a fish aquarium in the foyer. Their apartment also had three large rooms, a bright and spacious kitchen, and a balcony. Compared to the cramped and dirty two room apartment of Momena living with her mother, her husband and their six children, Hala and Fardin lived in a palace.

Afghans who are without networks must rely on privately-funded organizations, such as the St. Petersburg Red Cross and the Afghan Cultural Centre, offering services to refugees within the city. The Afghan Cultural Centre is funded by a Kabul-based NGO that helps Afghans leaving the country as refugees establish themselves in new cities. Men who visit the organization’s headquarters in Kabul before departure are given the address and contact information of the ACC in St. Petersburg should they require any assistance upon arrival. The ACC in St. Petersburg has been operating since 1995. It offers an array of services to Afghan refugees, one of the most important being temporary living accommodations for recently-arrived refugees. The ACC oversees the running of two floors in a dormitory located in the city centre that is reserved exclusively for Afghans who require temporary accommodation. These rooms are generally used by families or individuals who do not have relatives or friends already living in the city. Arifat, the coordinator of the ACC, said that they usually rented the rooms out for a very small sum, although no matter how many times I asked, he would never give me a figure; he said that it depended on the room and on the person or family renting it. The average

duration of one's stay in this dormitory (*obshchezhiye*) was around six to eight months; after one year the price of the room increased by ten percent.³⁶ The most appealing aspect of this *obshchezhiye* is that it is located right in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg. The *obshchezhiye* had functioned in Soviet times as a residence for international students; three floors continued to house students, usually Russian, while funds from private donations and from other aid organizations had enabled the ACC to take over the two remaining floors for Afghan refugees.

Living in an *obshchezhiye* with other Afghan families enabled newly-arrived Afghans with no kinship networks to establish links with their co-nationals in similar situations. Another set of *obshchezhiye* rooms used to be available, as well, for refugees in an international student *obshchezhiye* located on Vasilievskii Island near Primorskaya metro station, but the facility was shut down for unknown reasons. The rooms were small for families with three or more children, but also relatively inexpensive, with all of the necessary facilities. The presence of so many other Afghans in these *obshchezhiya* ensured that the women did not feel lonely and did not remain long without friends. Children were also happy to live in such close proximity to their peers. They were usually sad to leave the *obshchezhiye* when their parents found an apartment.

Afghan families lived in apartments in various different neighbourhoods around the city. As such, there is no 'Afghan area', per se, although all the neighbourhoods they lived in were far from the city centre and not considered desirable places to live. Afghans tend to live at the extreme north or south of the metro lines, often at the last stop of a given line. These generally cheaper and primarily residential neighbourhoods offer a greater selection of apartments. While every family had at least some Afghan friends

³⁶ Conversation with Arifat, May 29th, 2004

living within walking distance of each other, the neighbourhoods in which most Afghans lived were often at opposite ends of the city. The wealthiest of my informants lived near Prospekt Bolshevikov station while the poorest lived near Prospekt Veteranov. Others lived near Pionerskaya and Prospekt Prosveshchenye stations.

Prospekt Bolshevikov was considered to be a safer and somewhat wealthier neighbourhood while Prospekt Veteranov was condemned as the worst of these neighbourhoods because of the presence of “hooligans [*khuligany*]”. Momena, who lived in this neighbourhood, said: “I don’t let my kids go too far away from the house by themselves because these hooligans will give them trouble. I don’t trust them [hooligans] at all. They are even more dangerous for us, you know, because we are not Russian.”³⁷ In Russia the term “hooligan” is actually quite grave; it carries more weight than in Canada. One can even be arrested for the crime of “hooliganism”. Afghans had a particular aversion to said “hooligans” for fear of racist verbal or physical assaults. Most of the neighbourhoods where Afghans lived had their share of hooligans. Only one family, Neba and Katar and their two sons, lived in what was considered to be the best neighbourhood in the city: Moskovskii Raion, near Park Pobedy and Elektrosila stations. They were not living in this neighbourhood when I was in St. Petersburg, however; they used to live in an *obshchezhitelnye* room. Neba called me at home in Ottawa near the end of March this year to tell me that they had moved into a rather small and expensive apartment in Moskovskii Raion. The neighbourhood has traditionally been home to professionals such as doctors and professors and other members of the *intelligentsia*, and also to a large percentage of St. Petersburg’s Jewish population. Neba said that it was nearly impossible to find vacant apartments in any area, let alone reasonably priced ones;

³⁷ Interview with Momena, June 10th, 2004

as such, they are renting one that she considers to be unreasonably priced. They are currently paying 200 euros per month for a one room apartment (this always includes a separate kitchen and bathroom); even this rent is unaffordable for them and they are able to pay it only with the help of Neba's brother in England. Neba is worried that they will have to move again soon; if this happens it will be their third time moving since New Years day of this year, 2005.

Along with locating housing, Afghans are faced with the task of earning a living. Once again, existing networks ease this burden. Those with networks of support usually begin working very soon after their arrival. The majority of Afghan men work as *torgovtsy* (vendors) in various markets around the city; most of these *torgovtsy* sell out of Apraksin Dvor downtown.³⁸ The *torgovtsy* are divided into two categories: those who buy their goods at source, and those who buy their goods through a middleman. I will call the former traders and the latter sellers. Traders are generally Afghan men who have existing networks of relatives and friends in St. Petersburg, and often in Moscow as well; they use these connections to establish themselves as traders. In order to work as a trader, it is necessary to be connected to a wholesaler – one who sells goods in bulk near cost. Traders purchase their goods from wholesalers, many of whom are in Moscow. Some of these Afghan traders travel to Moscow by train on a regular basis where they buy their goods in bulk from these wholesalers and transport them back to St. Petersburg for sale in their own market stalls. According to Osman Zarif, a prominent figure in the Afghan community, traders must coordinate the rental of stalls, the bulk purchase of consumer goods, the transportation of the goods from Moscow to St. Petersburg, and

³⁸ Apraksin Dvor, located near Gostiny Dvor metro station and shopping centre, is the largest clothing, footwear and household item market in the city. Neither produce nor meat is sold in this market, only drygoods.

their sale at one of the St. Petersburg stalls.³⁹ Sellers, on the other hand, buy their goods from the traders and sell them at their own stalls. Because they have used a middleman, they make a smaller profit on the sale of each product. It is possible to move from seller to trader by establishing one's own connection with a wholesaler, but this may take a long time.

Regardless of which category they fall into, all Afghan men are required to work long days with few, if any, days off in order to earn enough to feed and clothe their families. The days when they do not open their stalls, many of them make whirlwind trips by train to Moscow where they purchase their goods at source to bring back to sell in St. Petersburg. These trips are often the closest they may come to having a day off. Their work days begin at 9am, when most markets open, and finish anywhere from 6pm to 8pm, depending on the day of the week and the season. Their earnings fluctuate; certain times of the year are more or less profitable than others and often their standard of living reflects this. The most profitable months are the summer months and December.⁴⁰ Fardin claims that the hardest month of the year is January because after New Years everyone has spent their money on gifts and parties and consequently makes no unnecessary purchases for at least a month afterwards. The quality of the food he feeds his family diminishes in January and early February. Fardin dreams of a job that offers him security and a steady salary; he often compares his lot to those of his relatives in Germany and Canada, who have full-time salaried positions with benefits such as health insurance and a dental plan, as well as one or two days off per week. He also compares his current employment to his well-remunerated job in the civil service in Kabul. He

³⁹ Kozlovskaya, October 11th, 2001.

⁴⁰ Interview with Fardin at his home, July 6th, 2004

remembers this job with fondness and is unhappy with his drop in economic and social status in St. Petersburg.

Themes of pride and prestige are evident when examining the diaspora experience of these Afghan men. For nearly all, the move to St. Petersburg has resulted in a significant drop in both social and economic status which affects their pride and self-worth. Many Afghan men now living in St. Petersburg and working as *torgovtsy* are, like Fardin, highly educated professionals or civil servants from Afghanistan. Because they are illegally residing in the city, and therefore have no official documents (such as Russian passport or residence permit), and often a poor to mediocre command of Russian, Afghans are poor candidates on the job market. This leaves them little choice but to work as *torgovtsy*. Even those Afghan men who received a Soviet Leningrad education can be seen selling goods out of market stalls. Katar, an electrical engineer by profession, was dismissed from his job less than one year after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He now sells watches and clocks at an indoor stall in Apraksin Dvor. Mustafa, who works a few stalls down from Katar selling dishes and kitchen items, earned a degree in civil engineering from the State University in Soviet Leningrad. Although their Russian is flawless, they do not have legal status in the city; they were international students in the Soviet Union and not Soviet citizens. Because of this, working as a *torgovets* is their most attractive option. Since most of my informants come from fairly well-to-do backgrounds in Afghanistan, working as a *torgovets* is a significant loss of prestige for them. Maliha Zulfacar points out that for men in Afghanistan, “a man’s economic standing is part of his social standing.”⁴¹ Many are unhappy about having to

⁴¹ Maliha Zulfacar. *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany: a Comparative Analysis of the Use of Ethnic Social Capital*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997, p. 184

accept this low-status position because they worked hard to obtain a higher education and to advance in their respective professions in Kabul. Oman, who worked as a chemical engineer in Kabul, said: “To think that I worked so hard, studied for so long in Kabul just to end up doing this [working at the market] is crazy. My eight year old son can do this job. He comes to work with me sometimes on his days off of school and he sells stuff in my place. Can you imagine?”⁴² This loss of prestige leads to feelings of insecurity and worthlessness, as well as bitterness with the circumstances that have landed them in this situation.

This aspect of immigrant psychology has an obvious affect on the outcome of adaptation and integration. Other researchers have identified the drop in status which occurs for many male immigrants as a key factor in affecting integration. In Zulfacar’s field work with Afghan immigrants in Germany and the U.S., she discovered similar instances of hurt pride and lowered feelings of self-worth among her male respondents in both countries. Many men in her study are reluctant to even accept such low-status jobs as gardener or used-car salesperson and prefer to remain unemployed and receive social assistance.⁴³ In St. Petersburg, where social assistance is not available to Afghan refugees with no legal status in the city, Afghan men must earn a living in whatever way possible. They nonetheless experience the same feelings of resentment at their drop in status as unemployed Afghans in the U.S. and Germany.

The other major factor contributing to a sense of self-worthlessness among Afghan men is their continued dependence on support networks, local, regional and international. While these networks are essential to these men in aiding them through the

⁴² Conversation with Oman at his stall in Apraksin Dvor, June 8th, 2004

⁴³ Zulfacar, p. 182-5

acclimatization period, they nonetheless have a negative consequence which cannot be ignored. Throughout the period of acclimatization, and often beyond it, these “newcomers” remain very dependent on the “old-timers”. Oman could not pay his rent for months after the family moved into their own apartment and consequently he depended on his brother, Dariush, to pay the rent. This dependency can sometimes be long-lived and often results in feelings of inadequacy and uselessness among Afghan males. It alters the power dynamics between men already established in the city and those who are recent arrivals, creating a relationship that is characterized by the unequal distribution of power. “New-comers” rely on other men, relatives or friends, to find them work and housing, and often for financial support as well. In some instances, they are dependent on a male relative, brother, father or cousin, of their wife, which is particularly detrimental to their pride. Afghanistan is a patriarchal society and the man is expected to provide for his family. If he is dependent on his wife’s brother in order to feed and house his family then he is failing in his duties as a man.

In this respect, acclimatization is highly gendered. While men are very much affected by their perceived loss of status in the diaspora and their dependence on others for financial and other forms of support, women do not seem to be affected by this dependency. This also relates to the patriarchal Afghan society. Women have been and are expected to be at least financially dependent on their husbands, and in general, dependent on their close male relatives. Even women who worked in Afghanistan earned significantly less than their husbands and could not have supported their families on their salaries alone. While women’s dependence on men exists in varying degrees in most

countries, it is particularly pronounced in countries like Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Dependence has long been associated with women and, especially in patriarchal Afghanistan, there is no stigma attached to a woman's dependence; to the contrary, it is considered normal and even desirable. Because dependence is viewed as a feminine trait, Afghan men's dependence on others can be said to have "feminized" them; they have become "less of a man" and assumed a role that is supposed to be reserved for women in their culture. The acceptability of women's dependence on both their husbands and other male relatives makes it such that, in the diaspora, this is not a source of anxiety for them the way it is for their husbands, whose masculinity has been compromised.

The St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees, which is affiliated with and funded by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), has identified the psychological stress associated with many male refugees' loss of economic and social prestige in the diaspora. Aside from free legal services, the organization also provides free counseling and psychological services to refugees. Social workers and counselors are available for both men and women, including a Russian-born Afghan woman, and a Tajik man, both of whom are fluent in Farsi. Afghan refugees can therefore arrange for individual counseling sessions in their native tongue. Aimed specifically at dealing with the particular problems confronting male refugees, the centre also offers a men's group once a week, in Russian, which is open to all male refugees regardless of country of origin. However, the group is unintentionally restrictive, since it is conducted in Russian. Newly-arrived immigrants cannot, therefore, participate, if their Russian is poor. This is, indeed, a drawback of the service. During my interview with Iskandar, the centre's Tajik

⁴⁴ Janeen Baxter and Emily W. Kane. "Dependence and Independence: A Cross-National Analysis of Gender Inequality and Gender Attitudes" in *Gender & Society*. Vol. 9/2, April 1995, pp. 194

lawyer, I was told that one of the most common themes in group discussion is loss of confidence and feelings of self-worth due to a drop in social status. The men's group works as a type of group counseling session for all men to discuss these feelings. Iskandar claims, however, that Afghans are very proud and few want to talk about their feelings with others.⁴⁵ Afghan men perceive this to be admitting weakness and loss of manhood, both of which are condemned in Afghan culture. The group is more popular with African refugees, who are more willing to discuss their personal lives with other men, says Iskandar. Some Afghan men do, nevertheless, frequent the group and are active participants in it. Only one of my male informants, Akbar, admitted to attending this group, which meets once a week. He enjoyed the company of the other men and found it to be a good way to relieve the stress of his daily life in what he still considered to be an unfamiliar culture.⁴⁶

The stress of daily life for recent immigrants in their new surroundings is an understudied topic. Although many studies focus on the integration process of immigrants into the host society (Berns McGown 1999, Zulfacar 1998, Daly Metcalf 1995), as well as on experiences of adapting religious practice to their new environment (Daly Metcalf 1995, Waugh, Abu-Laban and Qureshi 1983), and even of initial acclimatization problems like finding living accommodations and employment (Zulfacar 1998), very few focus on the seemingly mundane problems confronting immigrant groups on a daily basis. These include navigating the city on public transport, which many have never seen, learning to read signs and directions in the language of the host

⁴⁵ Interview with Iskandar at the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees, May 18th, 2004

⁴⁶ Interview with Akbar, July 21st, 2004

society, learning the language, buying groceries, taking children to the doctor, and other activities that are part of their daily routine. Michel de Certeau argues for an examination of everyday life practices, “not merely as the obscure background of social activity” but, instead, as a fundamental subject in and of itself.⁴⁷ Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early, in their study on everyday life in the Middle East, emphasize the importance of examining the everyday, simple activities performed by a people in order to really understand their culture.⁴⁸ An examination of these acts conveys dimensions of society that abstract theories on their own cannot impart. In keeping with this theme, many studies exist on the practice of everyday life in different cultures around the world, including Bowen and Early’s study on the Middle East, as well as Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb’s work on life in South Asia.⁴⁹ However, the unique way in which immigrant and refugee communities experience everyday life in their new surroundings has largely been neglected. I argue that these everyday experiences in the lives of recent Afghan refugees in St. Petersburg are an integral part of these people’s adaptation and acclimatization process.

After their arrival in St. Petersburg, Afghans remain largely dependent on their internal support networks and on services provided to them by local NGOs, which include Russian language courses, legal counseling and translation services, and places of refuge for women and for men. While several of my male informants were able to read the Russian alphabet upon their arrival in St. Petersburg (some had learned basic Russian in their capacity as civil servants in Kabul), some men and most of the women could not

⁴⁷ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. xi

⁴⁸ Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early, eds. *Everyday Life in the Middle East*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, introduction

⁴⁹ Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, eds. *Everyday Life in South Asia*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, introduction

read or understand any Russian upon their arrival. This posed great difficulties in familiarizing themselves with the city. Hala claims that she felt completely isolated upon her arrival in St. Petersburg: “I don’t think I left my apartment without Fardin for more than a month after I got here. I thought ‘what if I get lost in the street and then I can’t even ask for directions back home? I can’t even read the street signs!’ So I didn’t go anywhere without Fardin.”⁵⁰ Lida says that she avoided riding the metro for over a month after she arrived in the city. All signs in the metro were in Russian, which she could not read, and even though her husband told her she could count the stops so she would know where to get off, the thought of being lost somewhere in the depths of the metro and being unable to communicate with anyone, was too scary to consider.⁵¹ Samira learned about the services offered by the St. Petersburg Red Cross to Afghan refugees not long after her arrival in the city and wanted to take advantage of the free Russian language courses. She was, however, afraid to ride the bus and the metro in order to get to the courses, which were far away from where she was living. She pointed out the “catch-22” aspect of the situation: if she wanted to learn Russian so she could travel around the city freely, she needed to go to these courses; but to travel to these courses, she needed to know Russian. Her husband, Nevid, finally convinced her to follow the directions given to her over the phone by an Afghan lady who worked with the Red Cross. These directions were in Dari and required Samira to count stops on both the bus and the metro. She found the place without too much difficulty and after that was more confident in her ability to travel around the city.⁵²

⁵⁰ Interview with Hala at her home, July 1st, 2004

⁵¹ Interview with Lida at her home, June 24th, 2004

⁵² Conversation with Samira at the Red Cross kindergarten, June 20th, 2004

While their knowledge of the Russian language and Russian culture are still in their infancy, most Afghans who have relatives or friends in the city rely on them to help with daily activities like buying food or taking their children to the doctor. Most food stores in St. Petersburg have all of the products behind the counter and a customer must tell the clerk what items s/he wants and how many/much of each. With no knowledge of the language, it is nearly impossible to shop in these stores. Markets function in a similar fashion. Newly-arrived Afghans will therefore make lists of what they require and ask a relative or friend who speaks Russian to go to the store for them. Another option is for them to seek out western-style grocery stores where they can take whatever items they desire, put them in their cart and pay at the cash. Some Afghans who prefer to shop at these stores rather than be wholly dependent on their relatives/friends to shop for them must sometimes travel to another neighbourhood if there is no such store in their own neighbourhood. They must then carry all of their groceries back with them either by foot or on public transport. This can be time-consuming and tiring. Saima said that she bought her groceries in this fashion for nearly six months while she was living with her bother-in-law who did not live near a western-style grocery store. Food shopping, therefore, required at least two hours with the travel time on the bus.⁵³

Even more daunting is the idea of communicating in Russian with a doctor. Not only must Afghans explain to a doctor what is wrong with them or their children, but they must also understand the diagnosis and the required treatment. Hala had been living in St. Petersburg for a year last July, 2004, when one of her sons fell ill. After three days she saw no improvement and decided he needed to see a doctor. She called me up in a panic asking me if I was free to accompany her and Shakhrom to the doctor. I was, and

⁵³ Interview with Saima at her home, July 4th, 2004

we went with all three children, since there was no one to leave them with. In a mix of broken Russian and broken English, our usual language of communication, Hala explained to me what was wrong with Shakhrom and I relayed it to the doctor. I then relayed the diagnosis and treatment to Hala in our “language”.

Learning Russian is at least part of the solution to these initial adaptation problems. For this, Afghan refugees are dependent on the services of local NGOs. The Red Cross is the organization which has the most funding and therefore the most resources to offer Afghan refugees in the city.⁵⁴ The St. Petersburg branch helps refugees by providing, among other services, free Russian language courses. Russian journalist Polina Kozlovskaya, writing on the Afghan community in St. Petersburg, insists that no other organization in the city offers this service, an essential one for newly-arrived Afghans who had little or no previous exposure to the language.⁵⁵ These bi-weekly one-hour lessons were available to all adult refugees who had sought out the Red Cross’s services and were not exclusive to Afghans. The Red Cross’s programme, director Tatiana Valeryevna, supplied all of the language students with monthly metro passes that allowed them to use the metro a maximum of twenty times in order to attend the language courses; despite the relatively affordable cost of public transport in St. Petersburg, most would not be able to attend if they were required to pay for their own transportation. During the summer of 2004, seven Afghan women faithfully attended this Russian course. The lessons took place at the Red Cross kindergarten and women’s centre on Vasilevskii Island. When I first began volunteering there in October of 2001, these bi-weekly classes were co-educational, unlike most services offered by NGOs to

⁵⁴ Kozlovskaya. “Afgantsy Peterburga Kormiatsia Torgovlei” in *Delovoi Peterburg*, Jan. 26th, 2000

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Afghans. About six African men and one young Afghan man in his mid-twenties attended the lessons on a regular basis. The lessons remained co-educational until November of 2004, when the head office of the Red Cross received some requests from various women that they be made women-only. The kindergarten and women's centre were essentially refuges for women and their children, therefore most women felt uncomfortable sharing the space with men. The Russian courses then became available for men at the Red Cross's head office on Millionaya Street in downtown St. Petersburg, and when I returned in January of 2005, I no longer saw any men using the kindergarten space on Vasilievskii Island.

The willingness of organizations which help Afghan refugees to make their services single-sex is beneficial to the adaptation process of Afghans as it conforms to the values and practices that they are accustomed to in their homeland. Afghans feel more comfortable in a single-sex setting and any organization offering services to them needs to respect this aspect of their culture. Nearly all services offered by the Red Cross, Afghan Cultural Centre and the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees are gender-specific, and ones that initially were not, were quickly made so at the request of those who utilize them. Both Afghan men and women are aided through the adaptation and acclimatization processes by uniquely male and female spaces of refuge at the Afghan Cultural Centre and the Red Cross, respectively. The daily activities of both men and women involve frequenting these spaces or utilizing their various services.

The Afghan Cultural Centre is a very useful resource for Afghan males in St. Petersburg. It serves as a type of refuge for Afghan men and boys. Beyond providing help with living accommodations, the Afghan Cultural Centre offers an array of other

services which mostly cater to men. Arifat, the ACC's coordinator, invited me there one afternoon to meet the men who were the key actors in the functioning of the Centre. I interviewed them briefly about the services offered by the ACC and about who took advantage of these services. The ACC was housed on the second floor of a rather dilapidated building in the heart of Apraksin Dvor, where the majority of Afghan men work as *torgovtsy*; it would have been impossible to find the space if Arifat had not led me there. The ACC consisted of two small rooms and one slightly larger room, each with so much furniture in it that movement was difficult. The space was reserved for men. Afghan men and boys (usually between the ages of 10 and 18) visited the ACC on a regular basis to drink tea and socialize, to use one of the two computers with internet access set up in the space, and to take advantage of the small library of Afghan books which must be read on site. Each time I went to the space, between a half dozen to a dozen men and boys were engaged in one of the aforementioned activities. By far the most popular of these was socializing; since most of the Afghan men who frequented the ACC worked in the market, many stopped by for a chat or a cup of tea while on break from their stalls.

Some of the teenage boys who were regulars at the ACC did not attend school with the other Afghan children. Several reasons for these boys' truancy were offered to me by their fathers. Some were fairly recent refugees who were still awaiting approval for registration in school. There are two ways a refugee child can register in a public school in St. Petersburg. One is by having official refugee status in the city and the legal documents that go with that status. Alternately, those who do not have this status – the majority of my informants – can use the Red Cross channels for the registration of their

children. The Red Cross can register refugee children without refugee status for school by serving as guarantors or sponsors for them. They can apply to the individual schools on behalf of the children and, if there is room in that particular school in the necessary grade, the school will accept the children. However, citizens of the Russian Federation and others with official legal status have priority over those registering through the Red Cross.⁵⁶ Because of this, children using these channels to enter the school system can sometimes be in the city for over a year without attending school. I knew of several children who were in this situation.

Another reason for truancy cited by the fathers of the boys who frequented the ACC was harassment from Russian classmates because of their dark skin, their accents or their refusal to eat pork. Several boys had stopped attending school, with the permission of their parents, for fear of further harassment and physical assault. Regardless of the reason for their truancy, these boys were the ones who made the most use of the library and the computers at the ACC. They were often joined at the end of the school day by their peers who did attend school. They could usually be seen in groups of four or five clustered around one computer or in the library room, engrossed in books on space, Afghan history and politics, Islam, or nature and animals. Several Korans were available for independent reading and study. All of the boys were encouraged by their fathers to read at least a few pages of the Koran each day, as well as other books they deemed educational such as those on nature and history. Most boys needed little encouragement to read whatever books were available at the ACC.

⁵⁶ Conversation with Red Cross employee Larissa Mikhailovna at the Red Cross Women's Centre, May 15th, 2004

While most Afghan men and boys who frequented the ACC did so for social purposes, the organization's *raison d'être* was to provide a gamut of services to Afghan refugees, particularly ones who had only recently arrived in St. Petersburg. Arifat, a lawyer by profession, had become specialized in the rights of refugees and foreigners in the city, and he provided legal counseling to Afghan men in need. He also offered free Afghan-to-Russian translation of any legal, employment or immigration documents that newly-arrived refugees might be required to show Russian authorities. Arifat, or one of the other men in charge, gives out his cell phone number, as well as that of the ACC, to newly-arrived refugees in case of problems with authorities; refugees could call either number and explain the situation and someone would come to their aid with translation or advice, and, if needed, rush to the scene of the problem. I questioned Arifat about the effectiveness of these interventions; he said they were effective but I could never get him to explain in what ways the ACC's interventions were able to help anyone in these urgent situations. He would usually just brush aside my attempt at extracting this information with the comment "They [the interventions] help, they help. They help in many ways." Whatever the results of these interventions, Arifat assured me that Afghan men found it reassuring to know that some form of support is available to them with merely a phone call.

The ACC also publishes a newsletter for the Afghan community; it is the only Afghan cultural publication in St. Petersburg and it is mostly in Dari with some occasional articles in Russian. Berim, an Afghan man in his early thirties, is the editor of the newsletter and he publishes it once a month. He does a good part of the writing for it but is also responsible for harassing other members of the community to contribute

articles and photos. He has hired Karim, one of the teenage boys who frequents the ACC and does not attend school, to type up everyone's submissions on the computer and to select photographs to go in each edition of the newsletter. Berim himself lays out the publication.⁵⁷ Even the newsletter caters to male readers. All of the submissions are written by men and, at least in the issues I read, the content is largely of interest to men. The publication included articles on workplace travails, advice on the best ways to avoid police harassment when traveling to and from Moscow, and a section about what was happening in the lives of kin in other cities around the world (which obviously was of interest to women, as well). In general, the ACC had little to offer women beyond a network of support for their husbands.

Women, on the other hand, had their own nucleus of support through the Red Cross kindergarten and women's centre located on the 11th Line of Vasilievskii Island, near Vasileostrovskaya metro station. Although the space is under the direction of the St. Petersburg Red Cross's main office situated in the centre of the city along the embankment of the Neva River on Millionaya Street, the day-to-day activities of the space are run independently of the main office. Two Russian women, Larissa Mikhailovna and Tatiana Ivanovna, and an Afghan woman, Faribo, are employed by the Red Cross and are directly responsible for running the space. Tatiana Ivanovna is the sewing instructor for the sewing courses offered to all women who frequent the centre, while Larissa Mikhailovna teaches the women to cut, style and colour hair. Faribo is directly in charge of the kindergarten and of supervising any children's programmes or parties and celebrations that occur in the space, as well as the distribution of food

⁵⁷ Conversation with Berim at the ACC, May 29th, 2004

supplied by the Red Cross for children's lunches, which the Afghan women take home with them once a week.

The women who frequent "Vasilievskii"⁵⁸ have transformed the space into a tribute to both Afghanistan and the Afghan women's community in St. Petersburg. The space is identifiable as a "women's space" in the sense that it is gendered aesthetically as well as functionally. The manner in which Afghan men and women have decorated their respective spaces reveals an interesting gender difference. Contrary to the plain white walls of the ACC, the walls of both of the main rooms of the kindergarten are covered with various memorabilia and paraphernalia from Afghanistan, giving the space a distinctly domestic feel. On one wall hangs a map of the country next to a poster of the Afghan alphabet. On another wall, two large photographs of Kabul hang next to a giant Afghan flag. At least three collages covered with photographs of the Afghan women and their children on various excursions with the Red Cross hang on walls in the foyer and near the blackboard in the main classroom. On these collages are photos of Afghan holiday celebrations, photos of Red Cross excursions to the beach, and photos of daily life at the kindergarten. The rules of the space are written in Dari and tacked up next to the door of the foyer. Rules include removing footwear before entering the space and donning slippers available in the foyer; cleaning up the kitchen after use; and always locking the door after entering the space. The "home" has traditionally been the woman's domain, a tradition that is particularly strong in Afghanistan. These Afghan women have transformed their place of refuge into a domestic-like space that easily

⁵⁸ The women all refer to the kindergarten and women's centre as "Vasilievskii". They say they are going to Vasilievskii or so-and-so is at Vasilievskii.

passes for a “home away from home”. The gendered nature of the space is therefore immediately recognizable.

Women arrive at the space in the late morning in order to partake in various services, from Russian language classes to sewing or hairdressing lessons. The purpose of these lessons is to allow refugee women to gain proficiency in certain skills in the hopes of helping them compete on the job market. Although I did not know of any women who were actually employed, many sewed tablecloths, drapes, aprons, oven mitts, and pot holders which the Red Cross sold to several stores around the city. The money from the sales was then divided among the women. In this way, they were able to supplement their husband’s income, albeit modestly. Faribo was enthusiastic about the sale of the women’s handmade items:

Obviously the sales don’t bring the women much money; we have to sell to the stores at a price low enough that they will be able to sell the products and still make a profit. But that’s not the point. The women gain confidence knowing that they are contributing some money to the household and they are happy that stores want to buy what they make.⁵⁹

The women themselves also expressed enthusiasm about the sale of their handiwork. Lida claimed that it gave her daily goals; she could aim to finish certain pieces in a certain amount of time, and she was satisfied when she met these goals. Women also sewed clothing for themselves and for their children which they could either not afford or not find in St. Petersburg. Momena sewed a beautiful Afghan robe for her eldest daughter Ariza to wear on major Muslim holidays. Hala learned how to make a copy of her favourite blouse and was very proud that she had sewed herself one for a quarter of the price it would have cost to buy it at a store.

⁵⁹ Conversation with Faribo at the Red Cross women’s centre, May 17th, 2004

Some women had older children who did not attend school. Like their brothers who frequented the ACC, they were often waiting to be accepted at a school through the Red Cross channels. However, Ariza and Eloha, two sisters who are 18 and 15 years old respectively, had not attended school in the entire six years that they had been living in St. Petersburg. They had been accepted at a school but did not wish to attend because the school had required them both to enter grade two due to their poor command of Russian. Ariza would have been 12 in grade two, a prospect she considered too embarrassing for words. Eloha refused to attend without Ariza. As a result, neither child attended school, although their younger siblings did. Ariza and Eloha therefore frequented the kindergarten on a regular basis along with several other girls who did not attend school. The kindergarten provided a refuge for these youth, who helped to look after the younger children. Three days a week I would give English lessons to these older children who ranged in age from ten to fifteen. On these days, boys who spent their time at the ACC would come to the kindergarten for the lessons. Our lessons would generally last for two hours. Attendance was sporadic, although a core group of five dedicated students attended every lesson. The core group was quite enthusiastic and requested homework and tests. One boy was eager to learn English so he could understand the lyrics to popular American songs, but I believe most just wanted some constructive way to occupy their time.

Besides the sewing and hairdressing courses offered to women at Vasilievskii, the Red Cross offers computer courses to all Afghans to help them improve their skill base and hence their competitiveness on the job market. Afghans, male and female, young and old, benefit from the computer centre for refugees opened by the Red Cross in 2002.

Computer courses are given free of charge to Afghan adults and youth aged 10 to 18. In keeping with the theme of sex segregated services, however, separate courses are offered for women and men, although the youth course is co-educational. Women attend lessons during the day and men in the evening at the end of the workday. Refugees learn basic word-processing, navigating the internet, Microsoft Excel and Office, as well as a simple accounting programme that can help with the construction of family budgets. Youth are taught all the above but instead of the accounting programme, they learned Photoshop. After the completion of these courses, each student receives a certificate of graduation. The goal of the courses is to aid youth in their studies and to increase adults' potential to find employment by providing them with necessary computer skills. Computer lessons as comprehensive as these would be quite expensive anywhere else, and, for Afghans, this would make them completely inaccessible. Many of my informants claimed greater confidence due to their newfound computer knowledge, and all were appreciative of this service. Building confidence is important for the successful adaptation of Afghans to their new Russian environment and any service that aids them to gain confidence is therefore extremely beneficial.

For recent Afghan refugees in St. Petersburg, each day brings with it new challenges. Beyond the initial tasks of finding living accommodations and employment, Afghans encounter obstacles in daily activities like shopping, navigating the city and communicating with doctors or salespeople, that most of us take for granted. Afghans employ various strategies to adapt to St. Petersburg life, such as the use of support networks and services offered by local NGOs. The main themes that stand out after an

analysis of Afghans' adaptation process are the importance of support networks and the ways, both positive and negative, that they affect the acclimatization process; the loss of prestige and status in the diaspora and its impact on Afghan men's psychology; the power differentials that develop during the acclimatization process between "newcomers" and "old-timers" which relate to ideas of dependence; and the gendered nature of Afghan men and women's places of refuge, as well as the services offered to them by local NGOs. Support networks are multifarious in nature and operate on different levels. They are local, regional, and international. While local networks provide logistic support, regional and international often provide financial support. The experiences of St. Petersburg's Afghans in adapting to their new environment are not, of course, homogeneous. Socio-economic status, gender, and length of time in the city are all factors which affect the adaptation process. There is significant diversity within the community in terms of the type of support that individual Afghans have at their disposal as well as the level of material wealth of different families. While some Afghan families likely occupy the bottom rungs of the socio-economic scale in St. Petersburg, others are fairly well off. Men and women are confronted with different stresses in the diaspora and react to them in distinct ways which reveal the gendered nature of the acclimatization process as a whole. This is reflected in the services offered to refugees such as a support group specifically for men dealing with confidence issues, as well as sewing and hairdressing courses for women. The gender-specific services that these organizations offer are an integral part of the everyday life of St. Petersburg's Afghans; these services help Afghans to overcome the challenges which confront them in their practice of everyday life in a new environment. Indeed, it is only through an examination of the everyday life and

daily routines of members of this community that one can really understand the magnanimity of what they face in the diaspora.

CHAPTER TWO:

“We Don’t Party all the Time Like Russian Women do”: Afghan Perceptions of Russians and Other Minorities and the Manipulation of Boundaries in the Diaspora

In this chapter I explore ideas of community, of “us vs. them”, and of the boundaries of ethnic groups. I examine the ways in which Afghans in St. Petersburg maintain the boundaries of what they consider to be their ethnic group and how these boundaries shift to accommodate new diasporic ideas of identity. My informants’ testimonies illustrate ways in which identity is constructed and adapted to a new environment and how these Afghan immigrants weave together various aspects of this identity to help them negotiate lives in an alien city. I frequently use the term ‘diaspora’ to describe the community of Afghans living in St. Petersburg. I therefore begin with a discussion of the meaning of ‘diaspora’ in order to justify my decision to label this community a diasporic group. I then move to an examination of what constitutes ‘ethnicity’. What does it mean to belong to a certain group? How is the idea of ethnic group defined? What does it mean to its members? An understanding of the concept of ethnicity is necessary in order to discuss the boundaries of ethnic groups and their meaning to members of these groups. Through the testimonies of St. Petersburg’s Afghans, I then illustrate the importance of stereotypes in defining inter-ethnic relations and of maintaining boundaries between different communities. Forming diasporic identities is a highly gendered process and I therefore explore the way in which gender has an impact on both stereotypes used and the motivation behind using them. Afghans use stereotyping to establish and justify, or conversely, to overturn and negate,

hierarchies of power between the various minority and majority communities in St. Petersburg, as well as within the city's Afghan diaspora.

The Afghan community is not homogeneous, although my use of the terms Afghan diaspora or community may give that impression. The community is, nonetheless, cohesive. Despite the fact that many Afghans distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of linguistic, ethnic, or class differences, or even time spent in St. Petersburg, there is still a strong sense of belonging to the Afghan community and viewing those outside that community as 'other'. The boundaries of 'self' and 'other' in this community are not static; rather they shift depending on levels of comparison. When comparing themselves with other non-Afghans, dichotomies within the community quickly disappear. Even other Muslim groups in the city are perceived to be outsiders. However, different non-Afghan groups were accorded varying degrees of "otherness". It is also important to note that the identity and character of the "other" may fluctuate, as does the level of animosity toward that "other".⁶⁰ Afghans were particularly hostile toward the Russian majority. Therefore, when the discussion centered on Russians, the Islamic identity of my informants as well as of other Muslim groups in the city united them against the Russian Other. In the construction of the Russian outsider, Islam links Afghans to these Muslim groups and is seen as the main difference between them and the Russians.

Although Afghans in St. Petersburg, based on their shared experiences of life in that city, form a unique community, they consider themselves to be linked to other

⁶⁰Shireen T. Hunter. *Islam in Russia: the Politics of Identity and Security*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004, p. 144

Afghans around the world. They are united with all Afghans living away from their homeland. I argue, therefore, that St. Petersburg's Afghans form part of the worldwide Afghan diaspora and that their connection to other Afghans across borders is integral to their understanding of their identity. The invocation of the term diaspora to describe many of the world's immigrant communities is contentious and has been the subject of debate among scholars for some time. What constitutes a diaspora? What are the criteria associated with diasporic groups? I would suggest that diaspora is a self-ascription; if members of immigrant communities consider themselves to be part of a global diaspora than they can be referred to as such. However, scholars suggest that different sets of criteria are required in order for a group to qualify as a diaspora. Anthropologist Avtar Brah invokes the U.S. Webster's Dictionary definition of diaspora as referring to a 'dispersion from' to argue that the term diaspora necessarily involves notions of a centre or locus, from where the dispersion occurs. This definition, she suggests, "invokes images of multiple journeys".⁶¹ Many scholars understand journey as essential to the notion of diaspora yet not all journeys can be understood as diasporic. Brah argues that a diasporic journey is, paradoxically, about settling down elsewhere, away from the locus or 'home'.⁶² Robin Cohen points out the sinister meaning of the term diaspora for Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians, to whom the term was originally applied. For these diaspora groups, the term signified exile or banishment, a "collective trauma" which resulted in their dispersal from their homeland.⁶³

William Safran's definition of diaspora involves more criteria than Brah's. For him, diasporas are "expatriate minority communities" dispersed from a locus "to at least

⁶¹ Avtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 181-2

⁶² Ibid, p. 182

⁶³, p. ix

two peripheral places” where they “believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country”. They also maintain “a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland” and as such “see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right, [and they] are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland.”⁶⁴ Further, the group’s “consciousness and solidarity are ‘importantly defined’ by this continuing relationship with the homeland.”⁶⁵ James Clifford, however, argues that Safran’s emphasis on the need for a diaspora group’s attachment to a real or symbolic homeland may be too exclusive. The Jews, for example, who, it is agreed, are the diaspora *par excellence*, do not meet the last three criteria of Safran’s definition. This is because, argues Clifford, the definition does not leave room for “the principled *ambivalence* about physical return and attachment to land which has characterized much Jewish diasporic consciousness, from Biblical times on.” For Sephardic Jews after 1492, Clifford points out that ‘home’ was not only the Promised Land of Israel, but also a city in Spain to which Ashkenazi Jews had absolutely no connection. Further, Safran’s definition does not allow for the characterization of South Asians in Africa, Britain and North America as a South Asian diaspora, when, as Avtar Brah would no doubt agree, the idea of diaspora among members of this group has centered around the ability to recreate their culture in diverse lands rather than an attachment to a specific homeland. Here is where I would argue for the idea of diaspora as a self-ascription. Common amongst Jews, South Asians, and Afghans is not an attachment to a homeland per se, nor a recreation of their cultures abroad, but merely their own understanding of themselves as

⁶⁴ William Safran. “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” in *Diaspora*, vol. 1, 1991, p. 83-84

⁶⁵ James Clifford. “Diasporas” in *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9/3, Aug. 1994, p. 304-5

constituting a diaspora and of having a strong connection to their wider community, world-wide.

Clifford suggests that, in place of a strict definition of diaspora which requires that all criteria be met in order for a certain group to be classified and therefore studied as a diaspora, it is more appropriate to take Jewish, Armenian, and Greek⁶⁶ diasporas “as non-normative starting points for a discourse that is traveling or hybridizing in new global conditions.” Due to phenomena such as decolonization, increased immigration, globalization of communications and transport, diaspora discourse is loose; it is being widely appropriated.⁶⁷ The nature of these phenomena necessarily implies increased migrations and displacement. This, in turn, implies an increase in minority communities living away from their place of birth or origin. The term diaspora must be able to adapt to these new realities by moving away from strict criteria such as attachment to homeland. We should no longer understand diaspora as only describing the communities to which the term was originally applied – Jews, Armenians, Africans – but rather as a term that can be appropriated by any group which identifies itself as such. Further, Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang caution against overemphasizing the idea of diaspora as “the scattering of atomized, deterritorialized individuals forever in motion”. They argue instead for the emphasis to be on “the *networks* and *connections* between people in different places.”⁶⁸ Based on this argument, the Afghan community in St. Petersburg can justifiably be called a diasporic group. My informants all have contact with other Afghans living in various countries worldwide and they consider themselves to

⁶⁶ The term ‘diaspora’ was originally used to refer to these dispersions. See Clifford 1994.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 306

⁶⁸ Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang. “‘Home’ and ‘Away’: Foreign Domestic Workers and Negotiations of Diasporic Identity in Singapore” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 23/4, 2000, p. 414 (413-29)

be connected to these people through their perception of a common identity and a common experience of recreating an Afghan community away from their homeland.

Just as contentious as the definition of diaspora is the concept of ethnicity. An examination of identity among a certain group of people, an ethnic group or a particular community requires a discussion of the meanings of ethnicity. The two main approaches to the concept of ethnicity have been the primordial and the structural or instrumental. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz championed the primordial school, arguing that ethnicity is based on primordial attachments, or the “givens” of social existence – kin connection, religion, language, and custom. According to Geertz belonging to an ethnic group means:

one is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some *unaccountable absolute* import attributed to the very tie itself [emphasis added].⁶⁹

The primordial school takes as its starting point the idea that ethnicity and ethnic group membership are essentially decided at birth based on the community one is born into. In other words, primordialists maintain that ethnicity is static, bounded, and ineffable; cultural “givens” such as language and kinship reinforce bonds, often coercive, within each specific community.⁷⁰

Structuralists or instrumentalists, on the other hand, maintain that ethnicity is based not on primordial or inherent attachments but rather on ideas of Self and Other that are constructed through social interactions and the interdependency of different groups of

⁶⁹ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., p. 259

⁷⁰ Sian Jones. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

people. Ethnicity is fluid, dynamic and situational.⁷¹ Fredrik Barth, founder of the structural approach to ethnicity, argues that ethnic groups do not exist in isolation; ethnicity does not depend on the absence of intergroup interaction but rather is constructed by these very interactions.⁷² For Barth, the principle feature of an ethnic group is “the characteristic of self-ascription and ascription by others”.⁷³ In other words, the actors themselves form the idea of ethnicity and ethnic groups by categorizing both themselves and others in order to facilitate interaction; they, therefore, form ethnic groups. This continual process of ethnic group reinforcement is demonstrated by my informants’ testimonies and their invocations of both positive and negative stereotypes of themselves and of those with whom they interact.

Antonio Gramsci supports the structural view of ethnicity through his description of identity, although his approach differs from that of Barth. Identity, claims Gramsci, of which ethnicity is a major component, marks the conjuncture of one’s past with the reality of one’s present social, cultural and economic relations.⁷⁴ It is this articulation, this intersection of everyday life with “the economic and political relations of subordination and domination” that define one’s identity. This view opposes the idea of essentialism, claiming that ethnicity, including social, political and class formations, do not exist *a priori* but rather are the product of this articulation.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Donald L. Horowitz. *Structure and Strategy in Ethnic Conflict*. Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics, Washington, D.C., April 20th-21st, 1998.
<http://www.worldbank.org/html/rad/abcde/horowitz.pdf>, accessed July 4th, 2005

⁷² Fredrik Barth. “Introduction” in Fredrik Barth, ed. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Oslo:Universitetsforlaget, 1969, p. 9-10

⁷³ Ibid, p. 13

⁷⁴ Antonio Gramsci. “Notes for an Introduction and Approach to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture” in David Forgacs, ed., *A Gramsci Reader*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988, p. 326

⁷⁵ Jonathan Rutherford. “A Place Called Home” in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 20

The primordial approach to ethnicity cannot account for the fluidity of the boundaries of ethnic group relations and, therefore, inevitably paints ethnic group identification as a static phenomenon. If membership in an ethnic community is determined by primordial attachments and is not contingent upon social interaction, then movement between different groups or shifting of groups' boundaries is inherently impossible. Nor can this approach account for the reconfiguration of aspects of identity in the diaspora. The diaspora experience plays a role in reshaping the identity of group members as they are confronted with new phenomena and new ideas of the "other". My research with St. Petersburg's Afghans demonstrates the complexity of ethnicity and proves that both primordialists and structuralists are too simplistic in their examination of the phenomenon. While the boundaries between ethnic groups are constantly shifting, my informants nonetheless cling to their identity as Afghans and their attachment to the land of Afghanistan. Afghans themselves see their membership in the Afghan community as immutable and uncontested. To them, identity is, indeed, primordial. What is situational, dynamic and fluid, I would argue, are the relations or boundaries between ethnic groups.

What the primordialists fail to consider are boundaries, but my informants' testimonies show that boundaries between ethnic groups may be as important as the composition of the groups. Contrary to the primordial approach, the structural approach emphasizes the importance of the boundaries that define the group over the composition and substance of the group itself. Barth argues that the continuity of ethnic communities depends entirely on the maintenance of boundaries between those communities. This means that "the cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural

characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed.”⁷⁶ The boundaries that define ethnic groups are continually shifting to accommodate new ideas of members and non-members. The criteria for group membership shifts depending on who is classified as ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ at any given time. For example, when members of the Afghan diaspora focus their gaze inward, they draw boundaries between different types of Afghans within the larger Afghan community. When they focus that gaze outward and direct it toward the majority Russians, the in-group is often so inclusive that it consists not only of all Afghans but of nearly all other Muslim minority groups in St. Petersburg; the boundary shifts so that the group’s definition of ‘Them’ is exclusively Russians rather than all those who are not Afghan. Despite this, there remains among Afghans an indisputable attachment to a set of traits and customs which they feel define their identity as Afghan above all else.

Barth emphasized that there is a difference between “ethnic group” and “culture” although the terms were often used interchangeably. Ethnic groups are, first and foremost, a form of social organization “in which the participants themselves make use of certain cultural traits from their past, a past which may or may not be verifiable historically.” Culture, on the other hand, is a collection of traits “that are postulated as external emblems (clothing, language, etc.) or even fundamental values (e.g., faithfulness in friendship)” that can be taken “from one’s own tradition or from other people’s or simply be created”.⁷⁷ Therefore, the cultural traits by which an ethnic group defines itself may or may not define the totality of the culture. Anthropologist Eugene Roosens argues that ethnic groups define themselves by only a combination of characteristics and cultural

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 14

⁷⁷ Eugene E. Roosens. *Creating Ethnicity*. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, 1989, p. 12

traits that the actors deem relevant to their identity. Further, claims Roosens, these traits are not the static markers of an ethnic group's identity; rather, they can be replaced by others over time.⁷⁸ What is essential to the identity of each ethnic group is the social border between it and other groups. That border is drawn by means of several cultural traits or values that make an ethnic group "different in its own eyes and in the eyes of others".⁷⁹ I argue that ethnicity only exists through comparison with others.

Ethnic communities manipulate the boundaries of their ethnicity and maintain relationships with outsiders through comparison with other communities; these comparisons often involve stereotyping, and inter-group interactions can be governed by various stereotypes, both positive and negative. Social anthropology uses the concept of stereotyping to refer to "the creation and consistent application of standardized notions of the cultural distinctiveness of a group."⁸⁰ Essential to an understanding of inter-group interactions, and hence of the identity of a particular group, is a discussion of the various ways in which stereotyping defines these inter-group relationships.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that stereotyping serves a number of functions. First, stereotypes allow individuals to classify people using simple criteria and therefore give themselves the impression that they understand what is otherwise a complex society. Russian sociologists E. P. Belinskaya and T. G. Stefanenko argue that stereotyping is the

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 12

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 13

⁸⁰ Thomas Hylland Eriksen. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press, 1993, p. 23-4

way in which most people position themselves somewhere in the complex social hierarchy of their surroundings.⁸¹

Stereotyping allows a ruling group to justify certain privileges available only to members of that group as well as control over a society's resources. Belinskaya and Stefanenko argue that majority group stereotypes of minority groups allows the former to defend their values, their position, and their rights on a territory which they see as belonging to them exclusively.⁸² On the other hand, minority or less powerful groups may use stereotypes directed toward the ruling group to regain a sense of symbolic power. Eriksen calls this type of stereotyping "the symbolic revenge of the downtrodden."⁸³ Sometimes stereotyping can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Eriksen uses the example of education to illustrate this: a dominant group can continually claim that a minority group is intellectually inferior, and then, by restricting this group's access to the same quality of education that is available to the ruling group, can stunt the intellectual development of the minority group. The stereotype then becomes the reality in the eyes of the dominant group.⁸⁴

Finally, stereotyping aids in defining the boundaries of one's community. Stereotypes of other groups, both minority and majority, allow individuals to justify their membership in one group over another by invoking positive stereotypes of those who are similar to them and negative stereotypes of those who they see as different. Usually stereotypes of other groups imply that one's own group is superior.⁸⁵ For example,

⁸¹ E. P. Belinskaya and T. G. Stepanenko. "Etnicheskie Stereotipy i Protsess Stereotipizatsii" in A. E. Egorovoi, ed. *Etnicheskaya Psikhologhia*. Cankt-Peterbourg: Rech', 2003, p. 199

⁸² Ibid, p. 199

⁸³ Eriksen, p. 25

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 25

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 25

common stereotypes of Russian men as lazy drunks allow Afghan men to feel a sense of empowerment because they work hard and rarely drink. Invoking the stereotype of the lazy Russian raises the value of industrious Afghan men and gives them a sense of pride in what they perceive to be superior Afghan traits.

I will draw on a variety of examples to illustrate the ways in which members of the Afghan diaspora in St. Petersburg use stereotyping to define the boundaries of their group. Afghans apply stereotypes to other Afghans as the community is not homogeneous; it is split into Pashtun Afghans and Persian or Tajik Afghans. Each group has brought with it from Afghanistan stereotypes of the other. It should be noted that although Pashtuns make up the largest minority in Afghanistan at 40 percent of the population, in Kabul they are far less numerous. Persians are a powerful group in Kabul and, indeed, Dari is the language of the capital. Many non-Persians whose native language is something else nonetheless speak Dari as a second language.⁸⁶ Speakers of Pashto who reside in Kabul, therefore, also speak Dari, whereas most Dari speakers do not speak Pashto.

My everyday interactions with my Dari-speaking informants sometimes involved discussion of the differences between the two groups of Afghans, with an emphasis on the modernity and superiority of the Persian Afghans compared to the Pashtun Afghans. In Kabul, the essential “other” for the Persian was the Pashtun; although they are confronted with new, more salient “others” in St. Petersburg, the “otherness” of the Pashtuns does not just fade away. For my Persian informants, one of the most salient differences between themselves and the Pashtuns was one of modernity, which they

⁸⁶ Donald N. Wilber. *Afghanistan: its People, its Society, its Culture*. New Haven: HRAF Press, 1962, p. 57-8

perceived as good, versus traditionalism, which they referred to negatively as primitiveness or backwardness. The highly urbanized Persians valued what they perceived to be their modern ways – the most important being the greater hospitality of the Persians and the less subordinate position of Persian women – and were scornful of the Pashtun adherence to “backward” tribal codes which, among other things, placed greater restrictions on Pashtun women’s freedoms. Persians often discussed the lack of modernity of the Pashtun Afghans as an indication of their own cultural superiority.

My Persian informants emphasized their hospitable nature as indicative of their modernity. Dina, a Persian Afghan woman in her early thirties, claimed that when she went to friends’ houses she often noticed that she was treated more hospitably in the houses of fellow Persian Afghans than in those of Pashtun Afghans. Her explanation for this was simply that “we are just generally more hospitable than they are. It is not that they do not mean to be hospitable – they have good intentions; actually, it is that they do not understand the concept of hospitality and what it entails the way we do.”⁸⁷ I admitted to being skeptical of Dina’s insistence that Pashtuns do not understand what it means to be hospitable.

Hospitality is extremely important to Afghan society, both Pashtun and Persian, and most of my informants took pride in this national trait. Interestingly, both Hala and Dina spoke of this trait as an indication of modernity rather than of tradition. An example of this is an argument which occurred one day at the Red Cross kindergarten between Faribo, the Pashtun administrator of the kindergarten, and Hala, a 29 year old Persian woman who frequented the space. I was not present for the argument but Hala

⁸⁷ Conversation with Hala and Dina at Dina’s home, January 14th, 2005

related her version of it to me. She claimed that the cause was Faribo's lack of hospitality to those who either volunteered at or visited the Red Cross:

She is not hospitable. She gives guests nothing but yogurt and tea when the fridge is full of delicious Afghan food. The yogurt is fine for the children but she should be more generous with adults. Pashtun women do not understand hospitality like we [Persian women] do. It is because they are not modern. They're backward. Often I don't get along with Faribo because she sees things differently from me.⁸⁸

Dina supported Hala in her claim that Faribo, like most Pashtun women, was less hospitable than her Persian counterparts. It often happened that I would be given more elaborately prepared food and greater attention when I was in the homes of my Persian informants than in the homes of my Pashtun informants; of course, this may have been a way to prove to me that they were, in fact, more hospitable than their Pashtun counterparts. What I also noticed was that, more often than not, my Dari-speaking informants were wealthier than my Pashtun informants as was evident by their apartments, their clothes, and the food they ate. The economic discrepancy was likely a significant factor in determining their so-called level of hospitality since Pashtun Afghans have a very strong tradition of hospitality; it is one of the established customs of the *Pashtunwali* code, on which the social structure of the Pashtuns is based.⁸⁹

Anthropologist James Spain, who studied the Pashtuns of both Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1950's and 60's, claims that, indeed, after revenge (*badal*), the most important commandment of *Pashtunwali* is hospitality (*melmastia*). *Melmastia* consists of providing food and lodging to any who come calling, be they strangers, friends or even enemies. Spain emphasizes that the lavishness of the food and lodging is dependent on

⁸⁸ Conversation with Hala at her home, July 5th, 2004. As a side note, Faribo often did offer more than just a yogurt and tea; for instance, I was always offered whatever food the women happened to be cooking/heating up for themselves. While she did not always offer this to all visitors, Hala is perhaps being more critical than is merited.

⁸⁹ Nassim Jawad. *Afghanistan: a Nation of Minorities*. Minority Rights Group International Report, Feb. 1992, p. 11

the economic circumstances of the host and it is understood that a poor villager may offer only tea and fruit or perhaps some stewed meat. One who is wealthy, however, is expected to place all provisions in his house at the guest's disposal and offer nothing less than a feast.⁹⁰ Based on this criterion of hospitality, it should therefore be expected that my less wealthy Pashtun informants would offer only what they could afford which would no doubt be less than their Persian counterparts. This would not in any way make them less hospitable according to the *Pashtunwali* code. Whether it is individually or collectively expressed, hospitality is one of the most tangible markers of what it means to be Pashtun⁹¹; it is one of the cultural traits that define the border between Pashtuns and other ethnic groups, and, as Roosens would argue, makes the Pashtuns different in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Although all of my informants are from Kabul, where the maintenance of the *Pashtunwali* code is weak compared to the Afghan countryside, hospitality is nonetheless a custom which Pashtuns consider very important; the ideals of the code are still recognized by most Pashto speakers, even if they do not govern their lives on a daily basis, as they do in rural Pashtun areas.⁹² Further, hospitality is not just a main feature of Pashtun society but is also part of the larger consciousness of Islamic societies in general. Indeed, examples of hospitality in the Islamic world are numerous and the concept of hospitality "is embodied in popular maxims and Quranic verses that exhort the believers to practice it."⁹³ Not only Pashtuns, but all Afghans, the vast majority of whom are Muslim, consider themselves to be hospitable people. For this reason, I question some of

⁹⁰ James W. Spain. *The Way of the Pathans*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 47

⁹¹ Akbar S. Ahmed. *Millenium and Charisma among Pathans*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976, p. 58-9

⁹² Willem Vogelsang. *The Afghans*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p. 25

⁹³ Ahmed, p. 58

my informants' claims that Pashtuns do not understand the concept of hospitality the way Persian Afghans do, and I attribute the discrepancy more to Pashtun economic concerns. Most of my Pashtun informants in St. Petersburg were from less well-off families than were my Persian informants. The lower financial status of my Pashtun informants may have accounted for discrepancies in hospitality but some Persians were nonetheless insistent that their modernity compared to Pashtuns was evident in other ways as well.

Persian modernity also manifested itself, according to my informants, in the social skills of Persian women. Hala, who became one of my key informants and also a close friend, was convinced that she and other Persian Afghan women were more worldly and experienced and, most importantly, that they had more developed social skills. Their greater ability to interact with others and be superior hostesses was proof of their contemporary mentality. She said: "We [Persian women] are more modern and so we are better at entertaining guests and being attentive to their needs. We are good at hosting relatives, friends, colleagues from work, our husbands' colleagues from work, and sometimes even their bosses."⁹⁴ "Modernity [*sovremennost'*]" in the sense the term is used by Hala, implies the ability to navigate various and complex social situations that were not limited to interactions with one's relatives. It also relates to concepts of urban (*gorodskoi*) vs. rural (*iz derevnii*).⁹⁵ Because many Persian Afghan women worked in Kabul and were required to interact with co-workers as well as relatives, and were also more likely to entertain friends and not just relatives, they were confronted with a variety of social situations which were unknown to rural women. As such, they attributed hospitality and the ability to properly entertain to an urban and therefore "modern" way

⁹⁴ Conversation with Hala at her home, July 5th, 2004

⁹⁵ Jawad, p. 10-11

of life. My Pashtun informants were also from Kabul, however, Persian Afghan women seem to associate Pashtuns with rural life and, therefore, subsume all Pashtun women into the category of “rural (*iz derevnii*)” and “primitive” or “backward (*otstaly*)”.

Indicative of their “primitiveness” was the fact that many Pashtun women in Kabul did not work. Their husbands, being more traditional, liked their wives to remain in the home, if possible. Most Persian women, who did work while living in Kabul and tended to be more highly educated than their Pashtun counterparts, saw employment as another indication of their own modernity and hence superiority. In Kabul, the urban Persians form most of the middle and upper-middle class, even though Pashtuns occupy many of the higher government posts.⁹⁶ This translated into fairly prestigious jobs for Persian women. Many of these women worked in banks, in offices as secretaries or receptionists, as doctors or nurses, and as teachers and administrators in the education field. These jobs allowed them to work without constantly being in the public eye and without doing manual labour. Pashtun women, on the other hand, were more likely to be employed in areas requiring manual labour and repetitive tasks because the majority had less education than their Persian counterparts. Most industrial establishments required extreme physical labour; therefore, women were not considered desirable employees in these fields. However, because women’s labour was cheaper than men’s, companies in the manufacturing industry began hiring female employees in the 1960’s. One company, The Cottage Industries Bank, established the Women’s Handicraft Center in Kabul which employed many women mainly in the fields of carpet, rug and shawl weaving,

⁹⁶ Wilber, p. 79

embroidery, cap making, and bag and sack making.⁹⁷ This type of work was considered less prestigious by most Afghans than work in banks, offices or education because it was repetitive manual labour. Because these jobs were undesirable, when many Pashtun women did work, it was likely out of necessity; they had little choice but to work in less prestigious jobs. Wealthier, better educated Pashtun women, who would be able to hold more prestigious positions, were often prevented from working by their husbands. On the other hand, many Persian women, such as Hala, who worked in a bank, chose to work even if the household did not require a second income; it was, therefore, easier for them to obtain more prestigious jobs, since they tended to be well-educated.

The reason that more Persian than Pashtun women worked is related to the different ideas of gender relations and the role of women among the two groups. In Muslim cultures, a woman's comportment impacts on her husband, but the urban, more westernized Persians were less concerned with this than were the traditionally rural Pashtuns. Central to traditional Pashtun society is the pursuit of power, status and honour, and indeed, Afghan scholar Akbar Ahmed suggests that *Pashtunwali* "may be freely equated to *nangwali* or the Code of Honour".⁹⁸ One of the essential elements of the *Pashtunwali* code is the protection of a man's honour and prestige through the control of both material and human resources, the most important of which was his wife. Because a man's prestige is so dependent on his wife, the man fears his wife's continued ability to undermine that prestige through shameful or immodest behaviour.⁹⁹ As such, he has a vested interest in maintaining relatively strict control over her. While the

⁹⁷ Hafizullah Emadi. *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan*. Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2002, p. 79-80

⁹⁸ Akbar S. Ahmed. *Pukhtun Economy and Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, pp. 6, 91

⁹⁹ Nancy Tapper. *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. xvii

Pashtunwali code is less salient in Kabul than in the Afghan countryside, it is, nonetheless, a marker of Pashtun identity, and one that distinguishes them from the non-tribal Persians. This major difference in the mentality of both groups was one of the reasons Hala claimed that she did not always get along well with Faribo: “Faribo is not like me; I cannot really get along with her very well because she doesn’t understand my relationship with Fardin. She is not modern, you know? They [Pashtuns] don’t understand modernity the way we [Persians] do. They’re backward, wanting women to do nothing but sit in the house.”¹⁰⁰ Persians claimed that Pashtun men’s insistence on women remaining in the private sphere was an example of their resistance to modernity and attachment to outdated traditionalism. As a result, a common Persian stereotype of Pashtuns was that Pashtun men did not respect their wives the way Persian men respected theirs, yet another indication, for Persians, of their own supposed superiority.

Pashtun men do tend to exert more control over their wives than Persian Afghan men exert over theirs. For my Persian informants, Pashtun men’s apparent desire for complete control over women was evidence of their continued attachment to a backward tribal mentality. Persian women’s relative freedom in comparison with their Pashtun counterparts gave them a sense of empowerment, especially in their interactions with me, as a western woman. I question whether these women would have focused on ideas of freedom and modernity as the salient difference between themselves and Pashtun women had I been another Muslim woman. As a western woman, I would be more likely to relate to women who were free to work or to leave their home when they so desired, than to women who were subject to their husbands’ control. It is likely that my Persian informants also thought I would respect them, as autonomous women, more than I would

¹⁰⁰ Conversation with Hala at her home, July 5th, 2004

respect the more subordinate Pashtun women. Focusing on the different levels of freedom and modernity between themselves and their Pashtun counterparts allowed my Persian informants to feel that I understood and related to them better, and that I was more similar to them than to my Pashtun informants.

Invoking negative stereotypes of Pashtuns, I argue, was also a strategy Persians used to ensure that they did not occupy the absolute bottom rung of the social hierarchy in their new environment. Economically and socially, although not politically, Persians were the dominant group in Afghanistan's capital but in St. Petersburg they had become one of the least powerful minority groups. Differentiating themselves from Pashtuns allowed my Persian informants to retain a sliver of the power they held when living in Kabul. Further, essential to their idea of what it means to be urban Persian Dari-speakers is the identification of all that they are not; they are not Pashtun and do not embody the same traits as Pashtuns.

Pashtun women, of course, had their own perceptions of Persian women but they were not as critical of them as they were of Persian men. This may have been linked to the long-uncontested politically dominant status of Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Since Pashtun men were dominant, it could be argued that they were stronger and more powerful, deserving of greater respect than the weaker, less manly Persians. This is what Pashtun women implied in their discussions of both groups of men. The stereotyping of Persian men as weak and un-masculine can serve as a justification for Pashtun rule over Afghanistan proper. Since the group has lost its dominant status while living in the diaspora, invoking these stereotypes of Persians is also a way for Pashtuns to retain some of their former power.

Neba, one of my principal Pashtun informants, was quick to point out the faults of her Persian friends' husbands, and tended to consider them inferior to Pashtun men, who, she claimed, were more masculine. One mild January afternoon, I was talking with Neba in a park near her place of residence about Saima, a Persian woman who frequented the Red Cross Women's Centre, and her husband, Oman. Oman was an articulate, soft-spoken man, tall and slight of build. I had met him not long after my arrival in St. Petersburg in May, 2004, at the market where he worked. It was only after he invited me to his house to meet his family that I developed a friendship with Saima. Neba and Saima were friends but that did not prevent Neba from criticizing what she saw as Oman's "un-masculine" behaviour. She described an incident where Iskandar, the Tajik lawyer from the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees, telephoned Saima's home one day:

Look at how passive Oman is. Do you know that Iskandar actually called them at home in the middle of the day when it should be obvious that Oman is at work and Saima would be home alone and of course they talked on the phone and when Oman found out he didn't even say a word! Didn't even ask why a man would be calling his wife in the middle of the day when she is home alone with the kids! Can you imagine? Typical of them; our men would not allow that; they would definitely not approve of it.¹⁰¹

Neba was particularly critical of Oman, for allowing himself to appear passive with regards to his wife, especially in front of other men. She felt that a man ought to respect his wife's individuality but nonetheless be an authoritative figure in the house; Oman, and Persian Afghan men in general, she claimed, often allowed their wives to dominate them. She said:

Next time you go to Saima's you'll see how she treats her husband. Watch what happens when he comes home from work. Dinner is never ready! She makes him wait for his dinner, half an hour or more, after working all day. And, you'll see, the children don't even bring him his slippers until he asks them to, and even then they take their time. Saima does not even scold them for this!¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Conversation with Neba in the park near her dormitory, January 18th, 2005

¹⁰² Ibid.

Neba blamed this behaviour not on Saima or the children but on Oman for allowing himself to be treated this way by his family. She said that this was a common problem among Persian Afghan men, but that Oman was a particularly glaring example of it.¹⁰³

On the other hand, Katar, Neba's husband, was quite quick to place the blame on Persian women for situations such as the aforementioned. Katar did acknowledge that men like Oman were guilty of tolerating this type of behaviour from their wives but, for him, the women themselves were the principal culprits. I raised the topic of Saima and Oman's relationship with Katar during our conversation over lunch one day. As I had just spent that morning with Neba discussing the same topic, I was interested in hearing a man's perspective. He claimed that some Persian women had taken to treating their husbands rather disrespectfully after living for some time in St. Petersburg. Katar claimed that Persian women were more easily influenced by Russian women in their desire to appear "modern" (*sovremennyy*). This was the reason that they had taken to treating their husbands poorly, he argued.¹⁰⁴ I found this to be an interesting argument because most Afghan women, Persian or Pashtun, were highly critical of Russian women, and would likely have been rather insulted to be likened to them. It is significant that Katar condemned the very aspect of Persian women's character of which they themselves were so proud: their modernity. According to him, it was their aspirations to modernity which were their downfall and the causes of their relative failure as wives in comparison with Pashtun women. The Pashtun mentality valued tradition over modernity, as is evident through their adherence to the tribal structure of Pashtun society.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Conversation with Katar at the Afghan café (located in Apraksin Dvor, where he worked), January 18th, 2005

Divisions within St. Petersburg's Afghan community are not, however, restricted to Pashtun/Persian. A further division exists within the community that has little to do with language or ethnicity; rather, it is linked to history and experience and it is between Afghans who lived in Soviet Leningrad and those who lived in St. Petersburg only after the collapse. A small minority of the community, both Persian and Pashtun, came to Leningrad as international students in the 1980's. Several families have remained on Russian soil until now while others went to Kabul or, alternately, to Peshawar or Islamabad, Pakistan, only to return to St. Petersburg some years later. Neba and Katar, Faribo and Mustafa, and Lida and Massi were my main informants who had lived in Leningrad as international students. Neba and Katar had been in the city the longest, having immigrated in 1984. All three couples were both respected and resented by the newer Afghan inhabitants of the city.

These couples were respected for their excellent knowledge of Russian and their ability to understand the workings of the complex Russian bureaucracies, a skill they had learned as students in the Soviet Union. The years spent maneuvering through and manipulating this bureaucratic red tape while living in the Soviet Union is an experience that these couples share with Russians; recent Afghan refugees cannot relate to this experience. While the dichotomy between earlier ("old-timers") and more recent ("newcomers") waves of immigrants in diaspora communities worldwide is an understudied topic, I argue that this dichotomy is more salient among St. Petersburg's Afghans because of the Soviet legacy that Afghan "old-timers" share with the host society. These "old-timers" were, in many ways, "Soviets". Like their Russian counterparts, they waited in food lines, found ways to obtain black market goods, read

Soviet newspapers, and earned a Soviet education. These experiences made them less “foreign” in St. Petersburg and more comfortable. They spoke Russian fluently, albeit with a discernible accent, and they knew the best places to shop for certain items. Further, they could reminisce, with Russians, about “Soviet times” and even knew the correct colloquialisms employed by Russians. These skills made their daily interactions with non-Afghans much easier. Other Afghans in the community often sought their advice on matters such as dealing with their children’s schoolteachers, or consulting doctors. When Hala’s youngest son required medical care because of a serious tooth infection in June, 2004, she asked Lida to accompany them to the dentist because she was afraid that she would not be able to properly explain the problem or understand the diagnosis. Saima sought Faribo’s help when she wanted to purchase a new bed for her daughter. She was worried that without the help of someone who had fluent Russian and had frequently made purchases at that particular store, she would be overcharged.

The flipside to this was that many of my informants resented their dependence on the members of their community who had been in St. Petersburg the longest. They felt that the latter expressed attitudes of superiority because of their greater ability to navigate the city. Momena accused Neba and Faribo of arrogance. She claimed that these women were constantly “trying to teach us how to live”.¹⁰⁵ When I asked her what she meant by this, she said:

You know what I mean. You’ve seen it. They want to give advice or tell us how to do things even when we don’t ask for this advice. They always think they know everything better than we do. Like last week Faribo told me that I really shouldn’t let Ariza spend time with Russian boys and that I should instruct her to dress more modestly. Ariza dresses very modestly! She thinks she has the right to tell me how to raise my daughter! Ariza is an angel; she should look at her own Mariam. She is only seven and already a

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Momena, June 10th, 2004

spoiled girl. Faribo thinks she is in charge of all the affairs of us Afghan women. Neba does the same thing, but she is quieter about it than Faribo.¹⁰⁶

Significantly, Momena's example of Faribo trying to teach other Afghan women how to live had nothing to do with Faribo's knowledge of Russian or ability to interact with Russians; Momena is resentful because Faribo and Neba have assumed the role of community gatekeepers who monitor aspects of other Afghans' lives that are not even connected to external interactions. Momena claimed she would never ask Faribo for help with anything because she feared that this would give Faribo free reign to advise her on all other aspects of her life. Faribo, Neba and Lida were good friends and they defended their actions by claiming that they just wanted to spare the other women some of the headaches they had had as recent immigrants to St. Petersburg who did not yet have a strong command of the language. Lida accused the resentful women of ingratitude; she said they should take advantage of her, Faribo, and Neba's experience to save themselves unnecessary hassles.

Not only the women resented the attitudes of those who had been in St. Petersburg the longest; the men took issue with the husbands of Faribo, Neba and Lida: Mustafa, Katar and Massi, respectively. However, the men's complaints had little to do with any concrete actions of the latter three and instead were focused on abstract ideas about their different beliefs. Akbar, Nevid and Vikar were convinced that these men, especially Katar, who had been in the city the longest of anyone, were supporters of communism.¹⁰⁷ Although all the men were on good terms with each other and spent lots of time together, this did not prevent Nevid from saying that the fact that Mustafa, Katar and Massi had gone to study in the Soviet Union during the Soviet occupation of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Vikar at Akbar's home, July 21st, 2004

Afghanistan was proof that they were traitors to their country.¹⁰⁸ Afghan scholar Maliha Zulfacar argues that the failure of the Soviet-supported communist regime and the resultant political and social upheaval within the country created an absolute distrust of any form of communism or Marxist ideology. Since among Afghans labeling is a common practice, espousing even the slightest support for communism will stamp one as “a communist non-believer, disloyal ‘seller’ of one’s country”, in contrast to the true Afghan “who is a good Muslim and follower of traditional values”.¹⁰⁹

Despite these internal divisions, members of the Afghan community identified strongly with each other and established a boundary between Afghans and non-Afghans. All of my Afghan informants, regardless of ethnicity, had a strong attachment to their homeland, an attachment which was integral to their Afghan identity. This alone was enough for one to be considered “Afghan” in the eyes of my informants. Further, they were all from Kabul, and so shared a particular attachment to the capital city. Intra-community differences, therefore, dissolved instantaneously when confronted with non-Afghans including all other Muslim groups in St. Petersburg. The Afghans were, in fact, very supportive of each other, and they were quick to come to the assistance of others who they felt were part of their community. I had initially expected some form of cohesion or solidarity amongst Afghans and other minority Muslim groups such as Central Asians. I discovered quickly, however, that most of my informants had nearly as many negative stereotypes about these other Muslim groups as they did about Russians.

Stereotyping of other minority groups was a way for Afghans to establish their place within the ethnic hierarchy. As a group, Afghans were the most recent arrivals in

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Nevid at his home, June 30th, 2004

¹⁰⁹ Maliha Zulfacar. *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany: a Comparative Analysis of the Use of Ethnic Social Capital*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997, p. 157

St. Petersburg; Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other Central Asians and Caucasians had been present on the city's soil in relatively large numbers since Soviet times. Further, all of these groups had been Soviet citizens, while even the Afghans who had come to the city as students had always held the status of international student and never citizen. For these reasons, Afghans, as a group, were relatively powerless. They perceived themselves to be less mobile within the city and to have little access to the city's resources or even to resources, such as the mosque, which were accessible to other Muslim minority groups. Negative stereotyping of these groups gave Afghans a symbolic sense of power, a feeling that they were, in fact, superior even though they were presently in a disadvantageous situation. Afghan stereotypes of other Muslim minority groups usually revolved around dishonesty, lack of trustworthiness, or un-Islamic behaviour.

Tajiks from Tajikistan were unanimously condemned as an untrustworthy people. When confronted with the Tajik "Other", the Pashtun or Persian identity of the Afghans became irrelevant; they were united as Afghans vs. non-Afghans. Even my youngest informant, eighteen year old Ariza, was quick to point out in our interview that Afghans and Tajiks were not friends: "they [Tajiks] are dishonest; we don't trust them and they don't trust anybody because they try to deceive others so they think others are trying to deceive them."¹¹⁰ Dishonesty was listed as a Tajik character trait by several of my informants. I was particularly surprised by my informants' attitudes towards Tajiks because both groups spoke variants of Farsi – called Tajik in Tajikistan and Dari in Afghanistan – and could, therefore communicate with each other in their own language. Tajiks and Dari-speaking Afghans are also both Persian, and originally from the same region of Central Asia; little difference exists between the two ethnic groups in terms of

¹¹⁰ Interview with Ariza at her home, June 6th, 2004

origins, although they do not consider that they share a common history. I had imagined that these linguistic and ethnic commonalities would somehow create bonds between the two groups. To the contrary, my informants appeared to be even more suspicious of Tajiks than they were of other Central Asians such as Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. I never heard as many disparaging comments about the latter two groups as I did about the former.

This does not mean that interactions between Tajiks and Afghans were nonexistent; in fact, many Afghans had contacts with Tajiks living in the city. Iskandar, who was guilty of phoning Saima at home during the day when her husband was at work, is a Tajik national working for the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees; in this capacity, he deals with nearly every family that frequents either his workplace or the Red Cross. He is a soft-spoken, modest and very intelligent man in his late twenties, and not one of my informants ever spoke disparagingly of him; rather, he was respected and liked by all. A few of my informants claimed that their children had Tajik friends and consequently they had developed a somewhat friendly relationship with the mothers of these friends. These relationships and interactions with individual Tajiks did little, however, to raise the status of the group as a whole. My male informants were quick to point out that Tajiks and Afghans did not work side by side; the former all worked at the Sennoi Rynok (which sold essentially produce, meat and fish, and bulk grains) while the latter worked at Apraksin Dvor. They procured their goods through different networks. The Tajiks and Uzbeks were the purveyors of fresh produce from their homelands which allowed them to dominate this market, whereas the Afghans had to make due with selling non-perishables, many of which were brought in to St. Petersburg from Moscow through their connections. The two markets, although close in proximity, were nonetheless entirely

separate spaces. This situation was obviously not conducive to frequent contact between Afghan and Tajik men.

Just as a shared religion and shared language did not foment bonds between Afghans and Tajiks, neither did shared experiences of living as refugees in St. Petersburg create solidarity between Afghans and other refugees who frequented the Red Cross. Those attending the bi-weekly Russian lessons comprised refugees from Afghanistan, Palestine, Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Congo. I had assumed that similar experiences of navigating a foreign city, of seeking a place as an outsider within that city, of learning a new language, and of just generally sharing the status of refugee would create a sense of cohesion. My Afghan friends were, however, very critical of non-Afghans who frequented the Red Cross. One of the cardinal rules at the kindergarten was to remove one's footwear upon entering the space and put on one of the pairs of slippers available in the foyer. Some of the Africans who came for the Russian classes often forgot to do this and would track dirt or snow into the room. The Afghan women did not hesitate to point out the rudeness and lack of manners of the Africans who refused to comply with such a simple request. In their eyes, all of these African refugees were impolite and uncouth, and even those who did actually remove their footwear were subsumed into this category. The Afghans regarded the different customs and behavioural patterns of the Africans with some distaste and hostility. They shared neither a language, nor a religion with the Africans and so the latter were relegated, along with the Tajiks, to the status of hostile "other".

Further, as refugees, Africans were seen as competition for the city's scarce resources available to refugees. If there were no Africans taking part in the Russian

lessons at the Red Cross, for example, the class would be much smaller and each Afghan woman would receive more personal attention from the instructor. Since the Afghans are more numerous, they have been able to claim the Red Cross kindergarten space as theirs and, as such, they felt entitled to the space, and viewed the Africans' presence there as an encroachment on their territory. Stereotyping the Africans as uncivilized can justify Afghans' heightened access to the Red Cross resources by painting a picture of the African as undeserving of access to these resources. If the Africans cannot even remove their footwear before entering the space, they can reason, why should they have the privilege of using it?

The Tajiks and the Africans, although conceived of as "others", were not viewed with the resentment and disgust that my informants reserved for the Chechens. Indeed, the Chechens were the subject of more disparaging remarks than any other group in the city with the exception of the Russians. Afghans blamed at least part of their current misery in St. Petersburg with regards to the majority population and the authorities on the Chechens. When questioned about changing relations with Russian law enforcers over the course of their time in St. Petersburg, women such as Lida, Neba, Saima, and Momena all responded that since the start of the second Chechen war, police officers (*militsionery*) had taken to stopping women in the street and asking for their documents. All were adamant that *militsionery* had never stopped women before and were only doing so now because of the Chechen danger.¹¹¹ The Chechens were called wild ¹¹²,

¹¹¹ This phrase was repeated by two of my informants, Lida and Momena. Interviews with Lida at her home, June 24th, 2004, and with Momena at hers, June 10th, 2004

¹¹² Interview with Lida, June 24th, 2004; interview with Mustafa at his home, July 7th, 2004

aggressive¹¹³, violent¹¹⁴, and even crazy¹¹⁵. Lida said that they have a different mentality than do most other Muslims and they did not act like true Muslims.

Most of my informants did sympathize with the Chechens' cause and felt that they deserved to be independent of Russia, but none of them felt that this justified their actions. Interestingly, Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel'chenko, and Gusel' Sabirova noted that while other Muslim peoples in Russia – Tatars and Dagestanis – empathized with the Chechens, very few agreed with their secessionist and nationalist claims. Tatars were more likely to view Chechen national pride, but not secessionism, in a positive fashion, while Dagestanis strongly disapproved of both their nationalism and their drive for sovereignty. Neither group approved of the methods used by the Russian government to resolve the Chechen conflict.¹¹⁶

When I readdressed the topic of Chechnya during my visit in January, 2005, all Afghans were extremely critical of the attack on Beslan school children in the fall of 2004 and were horrified that Muslims could commit such an act. Many of my informants said that these Chechens should be ashamed to call themselves Muslims and they obviously did not understand anything about Islam or about what it meant to be a Muslim who loves Allah. Likely a result of the Russian media's interpretation of the events, the Afghans with whom I discussed the Beslan attack did not make any mention of the fact that not all of the attackers were Chechen. Or, alternately, it may have been enough for them that at least some of them were Chechen to confirm the truth about their Chechen

¹¹³ Interview with Hala at her home, July 1st, 2004; interview with Saima at her home, July, 4th, 2004

¹¹⁴ Interview with Faribo at the Red Cross kindergarten, July 17th, 2004

¹¹⁵ Interview with Fardin at his home, July 1st, 2004

¹¹⁶ Elena Omel'chenko, Hilary Pilkington, & Gusel' Sabirova. "Islam in Multi-ethnic Society" in Hilary Pilkington & Galina Yemelianova (eds), *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p. 235-6

stereotypes. My Afghan informants restated their belief that violence and aggression were incompatible with the Islamic faith. For this reason, it was assumed that Chechens had a corrupted view of Islam.

The perception of Chechens as un-Islamic is not unique to St. Petersburg's Afghan community; it is a common enough perception among other Muslim groups in Russia. Pilkington, Omel'chenko, and Sabirova found that many of their Tatar and nearly all of their Dagestani informants felt that the Chechens' aggression and cruelty were wholly incompatible with Islam.¹¹⁷ My informants were very careful to separate Chechens from other "true (*nastoyashchie*)" Muslims, including Afghans, Central Asians, and other Caucasians in this group. Chechens' behaviour was said by many to have tarnished the reputation of Muslims among non-Muslims around the world. Because they were representatives of Muslims in Russia, they were seen to be destroying the reputation of other Muslims and making their lives more difficult. Mustafa was particularly vocal about his belief that the Chechens were making life in Russia more difficult for all Muslims. "Russians don't see any difference between us [Afghans] and Chechens; to them we are all just blacks (*chernye*)," he said when I interviewed him this summer, "so if they hate the Chechens for killing their kids or their friends, then they hate us too, because to them we are all like Chechens."¹¹⁸ Mustafa was convinced that he had been stopped by *militsonery* more often in the years since the second Chechen war broke out than in all the years he had been in St. Petersburg since he arrived in 1988 as an international student. Islamic scholar Shireen T. Hunter notes that victims of racist attacks by skinheads and of attacks that have occurred in military installations also often

¹¹⁷ Omel'chenko, Pilkington & Sabirova, pp. 236-7

¹¹⁸ Interview with Mustafa, July 7th, 2004

blame Chechens for creating a situation where all Muslims in Russia must fear for their physical safety.¹¹⁹

After Beslan, everyone had an opinion on the Chechens and none were very high. Even before the attack, Hala worried that in Canada we would hear about Chechen terrorist attacks and associate this group with Muslims in general. She said she did not want my family to think badly about Muslims because of these “wolves”.¹²⁰ I assured her that in Canada the reportage on Chechnya did not focus on the Muslim identity of this group the way it did in Russia, but she was not convinced. Hala’s condemnation of Chechen terrorist acts was nonetheless coupled with a heartfelt empathy for the Chechen cause. She said that she understood why they were angry and that they deserved their independence but that this did not justify their terrorist tactics. Although she was very young when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and only remembered the latter years of the war, she had uncles who had died fighting in it and was critical of Russia’s imperialist nature: “they want to control everything and everybody”¹²¹. She said that Chechens were victims of this imperialism just as Afghans once were, yet Afghans never resorted to the tactics that Chechens have made infamous. Afghans’ dislike of Chechens is directly related to their perceived acceptance by the host society in St. Petersburg. Because Russians view Chechens as a threat, they subsume all dark-skinned Muslims into the same category and therefore view Afghans as a threat as well. This in turn causes Afghans to view Chechens as a threat to their ability to live unhindered in St. Petersburg.

¹¹⁹ Hunter, p. 157

¹²⁰ Conversation with Hala at her home, January 15th, 2005

¹²¹ Hala did not distinguish between Russian and Soviet imperialism when discussing either the Afghan-Soviet war or the Chechen fight for independence. She referred to both situations as examples of Russian imperialism.

Because of their perception of Russians' hostility towards their presence on Russian soil, Afghans constructed their own defensive view of Russians as the hostile "other". For this reason, the "us vs. them" mentality was particularly salient with regards to the Russian majority. Negatively stereotyping the Russian majority was, for Afghans, Eriksen's "symbolic revenge of the downtrodden."¹²² By continually invoking unattractive images of Russians, the relatively powerless Afghans living in St. Petersburg are vindicated for their marginal status in the city. As such, they held just as many negative stereotypes of Russians as Russians held of them.

Both male and female Russian character traits were unanimously condemned as undesirable. Further, nearly all stereotypes of Russians were distinctly gendered; these sorts of gendered stereotypes emerged only when my informants criticized ethnic Russians or when discussing discrepancies in Pashtun/Persian mentalities. Although they were critical of other Muslim groups living in St. Petersburg, they tended not to point out character flaws specific to each gender; rather, criticism of these groups was much more general: Tajiks were dishonest or Chechens were aggressive but I heard no criticism which pertained specifically to Tajik or Chechen women or men. However, stereotypes of Russians were always gender-specific. Russians, as the most powerful ethnic group in the social hierarchy, were in control of the majority of the city's resources and were perceived by Afghans to be responsible for Afghan hardships in St. Petersburg. As such, I argue, Afghans' negative stereotypes of Russian men and women function as gendered mirrors in order to portray their own virtues, thereby empowering themselves, despite their subordinate position, *vis-a-vis* the Russians.

¹²² Eriksen, p. 25

For Afghans, as for many Muslim peoples, the ideal Muslim woman is said to embody certain characteristics. These include chastity, modesty, intelligence, self-restraint, and the willingness to place the needs of her husband and children before her own.¹²³ Afghan women therefore take pride in their modesty, their morality and their exceptional abilities as wives and mothers. Russian women embodied the antithesis of what Afghans considered to be the ideal woman. Russian women, according to my female informants, were manipulative, immodest, aggressive, bad wives, and poor mothers. They were also accused of being promiscuous (*rasputnye*) and of going after “our [Afghan] men”¹²⁴. Frishta said that Russian women drove their own men to drink, and then, when they were ruined, went after Afghan men who did not drink. She claimed that Russian women were so demanding and manipulative and such bad wives that their husbands turned to alcohol in order to deal with their domestic situation. Afghan women associated all of these traits and actions with immorality. In this sense, Afghan women are employing the gendered discourse of morality as a strategy for demonizing Russian women, who are at the apex of the social hierarchy in St. Petersburg. Women are often “marked as vessels of the nation’s moral integrity”¹²⁵ and the “maintainers of morality”¹²⁶; in constructing an image of themselves as morally superior to Russian women, my female informants are asserting the moral superiority of Afghan society over Russian.

¹²³ Nayereh Tohidi. “The Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity and Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan” in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 25/1, 1997, p. 155

¹²⁴ Nearly every one of my female informants claimed that Russian women went after Afghan men; some examples include: interview with Momena, June 10th, conversation with Neba, May 30th, interview with her June 16th, interview with Adela, June 23rd, interview with Saima, July 4th, interview with Frishta, May 30^h, etc.

¹²⁵ Janine P. Holc. “The Purest Democrat: Fetal Citizenship and Subjectivity in the Construction of Democracy in Poland” in *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 29/3, 2004, p. 756

¹²⁶ Tohidi, p. 155

While having tea with Faribo and Adela one day at the Women's Centre, I recounted a story about my Russian flatmate Natasha's truant children. The children had been consistently skipping school several days a week and spending their time in computer clubs playing computer games. The story was a particularly funny one since I caught them in the computer club one day while they were supposed to be in school. Faribo's reaction was quite surprising; she said:

She is obviously a terrible mother. She doesn't know how to control her kids. She probably parties (*gulyaet*) all the time and doesn't bring up her children properly. My children would never skip school. Neither would Adela's. I don't know any Afghan women who have ever had this problem. It's definitely the mother's fault.¹²⁷

I admit that I was quite offended by Faribo's assault on my good friend and flatmate. I challenged her on the notion that a child's truancy was evidence of poor parenting; I told her that I had skipped school often enough while in high school and then asked her if she thought that meant that I had a terrible mother who didn't know how to raise her children.¹²⁸ Her answer was that "Russian women are different; they are selfish and irresponsible. In general they make bad mothers." Faribo's claim, therefore, that Natasha was a terrible mother had little to do with Natasha's children's truancy and, instead, was merely the result of her being Russian. In other words, Faribo would likely have condemned any of Natasha's parenting tactics as proof of her inability to mother. Further, Faribo knew that Natasha was a single mother hence by insisting that Natasha must "party all the time" she is implying that Natasha must be promiscuous and therefore immoral. For Afghan women, their immorality is mainly what made Russian women bad mothers.

¹²⁷ Conversation with Faribo and Adela at the Red Cross Women's Centre, January 16th, 2005

¹²⁸ As a side note, Faribo had met my mother in December, 2001, when both of my parents came to St. Petersburg to spend Christmas with me. Faribo had liked my mother very much and always asked about her and sent her greetings.

The Afghan men tended to be kinder to Russian women and more severe with the men. They conceded that Russian women were difficult and demanding but claimed that they were this way because their husbands were weak and useless. Russian men were condemned as lazy and useless drunks who hated to work. When I brought up this subject with Katar, I was given a tirade about the worthlessness of Russian men:

Russian men are completely useless! I wouldn't even call them men! They don't even work; they let their wives go work in their place while they just lie around and drink. Imagine!? Russian women work more than Russian men. Then the women go home and clean up and make dinner and take care of the kids and their husbands are still lying around drunk. Look around the market; who do you see more of, Russian men or women? Women! The women all work selling things in the market to support their useless husbands.¹²⁹

For Afghan men, industriousness was synonymous with being a man and assuming all of the responsibilities that being a man entailed. An industrious man supported his wife and children and was respected by other Afghans, whereas an indolent man was considered worthless. It was inconceivable to many of my male informants that some of the Russian women *torgovtsy* with whom they were acquainted had husbands who did not work and allowed their wives to support them. Katar, and other Afghan men, claimed that many Russian women recognized the virtues of Muslim men who did not get drunk and who were hard-working. In this sense, the Afghan men did not distinguish themselves from other Muslim men in the city; they were desirable to Russian women because they were Muslims, not specifically because they were Afghan.

Afghan men often had more contact with Russian women than did their wives. Many Russian women worked alongside Afghan men as *torgovtsy* at the market. As such, they often developed friendly relationships with these women and were privy to stories about their domestic lives which often involved, according to many of the men,

¹²⁹ Conversation with Katar in his dormitory, January 23rd, 2005

drunken, useless husbands. Nevid told me that he respected Russian women much more than Russian men because they were able to take care of themselves and support themselves; however, as *torgovtsy*, he also found them to be quite unfeminine. The Russian women whom these Afghan men knew and with whom they had frequent contact were all *torgovtsy* at Apraksin Dvor. The general consensus among all of my informants, both men and women, was that selling was an aggressive and unfeminine type of work. Saima, Hala, and Lida were particularly vehement in their scorn of Russian female *torgovtsy*. They claimed that selling was a very “rough type of work (*ochen’ grubaya rabota*)” and that Afghan women would never work where they would constantly be in the public eye calling attention to themselves all day long. Lida claimed that selling suited Russian women perfectly because they were naturally aggressive, especially in the way they made advances at Afghan men. She was appalled that some Afghan men actually responded to these advances from such unfeminine women and occasionally married them.

I asked if many Afghan men married Russian women and how this was viewed by other Afghans in their community. Arifat, Frishta’s husband, answered that it is not uncommon to see Afghan men with Russian wives; one reason for this is because Russian women are very beautiful and so Afghan men are attracted to them. He claimed that it was not condemned or condoned by other Afghans; it was just accepted.¹³⁰ Fardin, Mustafa and Oman all argued that the main reason why Afghan men marry Russian women is to obtain the documents required for legal status within the city; good looks alone were no reason to marry a woman. They were adamant that there would be very

¹³⁰ Interview with Arifat at his home, January 11th, 2005

few Afghan-Russian marriages if not for this because most Afghan men recognize that Russian women do not make as good wives and mothers as do Afghan women.¹³¹

Afghan men espoused the stereotype that Russian women are not suited to domestic life nearly as much as their wives did, however they tended to use kinder words. Mustafa claimed that Russian women made poor wives because they liked to go out and have a good time (*gulyat'*) and were immodest, in the sense that they were too overtly sexual.¹³² A general criticism of these women was that they liked to draw male attention to themselves; this was seen as wholly at odds with the general Afghan belief that a woman should be attractive and take care of herself but, nonetheless, remain relatively inconspicuous, especially in public. Most of my male informants claimed that they did not envy the Afghan man who had taken a Russian wife. However, the Afghan community respected men's desire to obtain legal status for themselves and their offspring and, therefore considered these marriages acceptable.

Afghan men recognized and often praised the beauty of Russian women, something which did not necessarily please most of the Afghan women. The men did not hesitate to mention this in front of their wives, which only aroused feelings of jealousy among the latter towards Russian women. Men who played this game were likely engaging in an attempt to recapture some of the power they had had in Afghanistan. Since Afghans had been relegated to a rather low rung on the ladder of the social hierarchy in St. Petersburg, they resorted to reclaiming power in the domestic sphere through interactions with their wives. Fomenting feelings of jealousy in their wives gave men a sense of empowerment through control over their wives' emotions. Although it

¹³¹ Interview with Fardin, July 1st, 2005; interview with Mustafa, July 7th, 2004; interview with Oman at his home, June 29th, 2004

¹³² Interview with Mustafa at his home, July 7th, 2004

was not common for these men to marry Russian women, there were nonetheless known instances of extramarital affairs. Many of my female informants harboured animosity towards Russian women because they had a genuine fear that their husbands may stray and take up sexually with one of them. Samira and Neba were both living this situation while I was in St. Petersburg over the summer. The other women spoke of both Samira and Neba with great pity, but Neba joked about her situation in front of other women for she hated anyone to feel sorry for her, while Samira wallowed in self-pity. By the time I returned in January, both husbands' affairs had ended.

I had not met any Afghan women with Russian husbands and wondered if this type of marriage existed in their community. All of my male informants adamantly replied that no Afghan woman would ever marry a Russian man. This would be harshly condemned by other Afghans and the woman would bring shame on herself and her family. When I asked why that would be the case, I received responses such as: "an Afghan woman should reject a Russian man's advances if she finds herself in that situation"¹³³ and "Afghan women should be modest and they should marry someone whom their family and friends approve of, and no woman has family and friends who would approve of her marriage to a Russian man."¹³⁴ Most of the men appeared perplexed that I would even ask such a question, so obvious were the reasons that Afghan women did not marry Russian men. This general attitude was in keeping with the Afghan idea, particularly salient among the Pashtuns, that women were the ones responsible for maintaining the boundaries of culture; they were the guardians of cultural integrity and tradition.

¹³³ Interview with Oman, June 29th, 2004

¹³⁴ Conversation over lunch with Arifat at the Afghan Café, May 29th, 2004

This is not a uniquely Afghan conception. To the contrary, the notion of women as bearers of culture is present, with varying degrees of salience, in most patriarchal cultures. Women's supposedly biological role as reproducers of a culture's future generations imbues them with the status of protectors of that culture. Feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis argues that this is because one becomes a member of a particular ethnic group by being born into it. Women, because they give birth to children, are responsible for the ethnic composition of those children; mating with a man of a different ethnic group means that the children will not be full-fledged members of the mother's ethnic group.¹³⁵ She will, therefore, have failed in her duties as a keeper of her culture.

Katherine Verdery makes the same argument in the context of citizenship and nationhood; a man who marries a foreign woman "makes her his nation's citizen" but a woman who enters into an exogamous marriage "loses her rights" as a member of that nation.¹³⁶ The responsibility for the survival of the nation lies with women as "mothers;" therefore endogamy is expected from them. In Afghan diaspora groups where some women did marry foreign men, these marriages were not accepted by other members of the community. A woman marrying a foreign man is thought to compromise her commitment to her culture and her people.¹³⁷ Maliha Zulfacar writes that one woman in each of her case studies – Afghan communities in the United States and in Germany – married a man from the dominant group. In neither case was her marriage accepted. Further, families hesitate to remain in close contact with either the couple or their

¹³⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis. "Women and the Biological Reproduction of 'The Nation'" in *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 19 nos.1/2, 1996, p. 17-18

¹³⁶ Katherine Verdery. "From Parent-State to Family Patriarchs: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Eastern Europe" in *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 8/2, Spring 1994, p. 228

¹³⁷ Zulfacar, p. 192

children in these particular inter-cultural marriages.¹³⁸ This fear of association is not so great when it is an Afghan man who marries a foreign woman.

Here, therefore, is another gendered dimension of diasporic identity construction. Because not a single man in the Afghan community saw an Afghan woman's marriage to a Russian man as a possibility, Afghan men did not view Russian men as competition for "their women". They did not express any jealousy of their Russian counterparts with regards to women. On the other hand, Afghan women had a genuine fear of losing their partners, or future partners, to Russian women. Their perception of Russian women as potential threats to their domestic lives increased their hostility towards and distrust of the latter. It also encouraged them to demonize Russian women both as punishment for threatening their domestic security, and in order to raise their own status in the eyes of Afghan men. Power dynamics between Afghan men and women are therefore reconfigured in the diaspora, as men are aware of the leverage that this situation grants them over their female counterparts.

Despite this, Afghan women's hostility and distrust of Russian women was directed towards a collective "other" rather than towards any individual Russian women. When Afghan women spoke disparagingly about Russian women, disregarding, of course the Russian girlfriends of Samira and Neba's husbands, it was always in the abstract – Russian women, in general, were like this or like that; I never heard any individual Russian woman condemned. Their interactions with individual Russian women were not characterized by jealousy or distrust; to the contrary, these interactions were positive ones, and valuable to the Afghan women.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 191

Many Afghan women had contacts with Russian women they liked and respected. These women were generally teachers or the mothers of their children's Russian classmates. Often, the only Russians that Afghan women associated with were connected to their children's education. Many women talked of at least one special teacher whom they considered kind and wonderful, and whom they respected greatly. Hala was thrilled when her young children began attending school because she knew that this would give her the opportunity to interact with Russians on a more regular basis and therefore improve her language skills. Having immigrated to St. Petersburg a year and a half ago, her language skills were still weak; over the summer, I often conversed with her in English, which she had learned while studying in Pakistan. By the time I returned in January, I noticed a marked improvement in her Russian. This, she claimed, was because she was now forced to interact with teachers and mothers of her children's classmates on a near daily basis.¹³⁹ She had become friendly enough with one Russian woman - the mother of her daughter's best friend - that she had once been invited to her house. The other Russian women with whom Afghan women had daily contact with were the women who gave sewing and hairdressing lessons at the Red Cross. These women, Tatiana Ivanovna and Larissa Mikhailovna, were loved and respected by all of the Afghan women who frequented the centre; I only ever heard positive comments about them. Although Afghan women harboured many negative stereotypes of Russian women, whom many viewed as a threat to their domestic lives, this did not prevent them from recognizing the qualities of many individual Russian women.

¹³⁹ Conversation with Hala at the Red Cross kindergarten, January 10th, 2005

Who, then, is the “other” and who is “one of us” for the Afghans living in St. Petersburg? Where can the boundary be drawn? The testimonies of these Afghan men and women tell a complex story of how identity is continually constructed, contested, and reconstructed through Afghan interactions with each other, with other minority groups, and with the dominant Russians.

Ethnic relations are “fluid and negotiable” and “their importance varies situationally”.¹⁴⁰ In Kabul, the principle dichotomy is between the Pashtuns and the Persians, the two most powerful ethnic groups. Although this dichotomy, this moderate rivalry, has not dissolved in the diaspora, its salience has greatly diminished. Both Persians and Pashtuns identify purely as Afghans when confronted with new “others” like Tajiks, Chechens, Africans and Russians. Based on their testimonies, it would seem that the most salient aspect of Afghan identity in this diaspora community is the shared attachment to Afghanistan, or, even more specifically, to Kabul. Afghans share a religion and a language with Tajiks but there is no solidarity between them; they share a religion with Chechens, but feel little more than resentment towards this group; with the Africans, they share a common experience of living as refugees in a foreign city, but this factor does not foment bonds between the two. But the boundaries between these groups are not static; different contexts cause them to shift to include or exclude members of other groups. For example, discussion of Chechnya isolates Chechens as the hostile “other” for all “*nastoyashchie*” Muslims; in this context Afghans empathize with Central Asians and other Caucasians all of whom feel that aggressive Chechen actions put them at greater risk in St. Petersburg. When confronted with the ethnic Russian, the Islamic identity of

¹⁴⁰ Eriksen, p. 21

Afghans, Central Asians and Caucasians living in St. Petersburg unites these groups, at least superficially, as a minority Islamic “Us” against a dominant Russian “Them”.

Afghans invoke stereotypes of both other minority groups and of the Russian majority to negotiate their own place in the social hierarchy. Stereotyping other groups can either empower Afghans who feel abused by more powerful groups (the dominant Russians, or even the Tajiks, who have greater access to the city’s resources) or justify their monopolization of resources by painting other groups as undeserving of those resources (the African refugees at the Red Cross). Afghans consider themselves a very proud people and their considerable drop in status in St. Petersburg to that of marginal people, who feel unwelcome by the host society, has compromised their pride. Since stereotypes of other groups often imply superiority of one’s own group, Afghans dwell on these negative stereotypes in order to reclaim some of their pride and self-confidence. If Russian men are lazy, Afghan men can be proud of their industriousness; if Russian women are promiscuous, Afghan women revel in their own loyalty and devotion to their husbands; if Tajiks are untrustworthy, Afghans see themselves as dependable and honest people. In this way, Afghans in St. Petersburg, despite the increased hardship in their lives, can continue to be proud of their culture and their character, and to maintain a sense of themselves in their new environment.

While stereotyping serves a useful purpose for members of the Afghan diaspora in their quest to establish their own place in the complex urban reality of St. Petersburg, it also works to their disadvantage. Afghans alienate themselves from Russians and other minority groups by continually invoking negative stereotypes of them. Although these stereotypes, which imply Afghan superiority, provide Afghans with a sense of security in

an unfamiliar environment, they also impede the ability of this group to successfully integrate. Afghans may very well be doing themselves a disservice by living in somewhat self-imposed near-isolation. Increased contact between Afghans and members of other communities in St. Petersburg will facilitate integration, and, in the long run, likely decrease Afghans' need to invoke these negative stereotypes.

CHAPTER THREE:

The Role of the Host Society in Affecting Integration: the Case of St. Petersburg's Afghans

The level of integration of an immigrant population into the majority culture is very much dependent on the host society's willingness to accommodate those viewed as outsiders. Successful integration requires the host society's political culture to provide a space for immigrants' free movement within social, economic, and even political spheres. In other words, "a political culture that emphasizes the ability of immigrants and minorities to participate in society as full members of it and that accords them respect as political and social actors" both affects and facilitates the process of integration.¹⁴¹ Rima Berns McGown argues that a people's political culture is evident in all aspects of minority communities' interactions with the dominant society. These interactions include, but are not limited to, public statements by politicians, celebrities, media, and religious leaders; the legal system; the education system; and both public and private sector hiring practices.¹⁴² The public's reaction to statements made by public figures is also integral to assessing a society's political culture in its accommodation of minorities.

I argue that the relative isolation and lack of integration of St. Petersburg Afghans into Russian society is largely because the Russian authorities and federal and municipal governments have made arriving Afghans feel very unwelcome. The relatively intolerant attitudes of Russian law-makers as well as the continued reinforcement in the media of negative stereotypes of visible minorities have penetrated the consciousness of the

¹⁴¹ Rima Berns McGown. *Muslims in the Diaspora: the Somali Communities of London and Toronto*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 160

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 160

Russian public. The political culture of St. Petersburg does not provide much space for the voice of minorities, and tends to isolate non-western communities. The Russian public often greets racist statements and actions by politicians and public figures with vocal agreement rather than condemnation. Not only is Afghans' ethnicity a great hindrance to their social, economic and political mobility in St. Petersburg, but it also precipitates racist insults, harassment by law enforcers, and even, at times, physical assault. Fear for their physical safety circumscribes the daily movement and activities of Afghans within the city and affects their interactions with members of the host society. These experiences have caused major shifts in Afghans' ideas of 'home' and created a type of community in transience, in which Afghans view St. Petersburg as a temporary misery on the way to 'the land of milk and honey' – either a return to Afghanistan or final settlement in the west.

Afghans arriving in post-Soviet St. Petersburg are confronted with a host society that differs greatly from the one which greeted their co-nationals who came to the city in the 1980's. My informants' testimonies abound with comparisons of their treatment by both the Russian public and the Russian authorities in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Russian attitudes toward non-Russians, and particularly toward Muslims, have shifted dramatically since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The collapse has transformed the social and political discourse on race and ethnicity in Russia.

While overt racism did exist at the popular level under the Soviet regime, at the institutional level it was frowned upon and officially deemed non-existent based on the principles of internationalism and the brotherhood of the peoples of the Soviet Union. In contrast, local authorities and law enforcers of post-Soviet Russia use official discourse,

the media, and legislation such as the *propiska* (residence permit) system as instruments through which to transmit negative racial stereotypes to the Russian general public. Thus, while in Soviet Russia there existed mostly sociological racism (racism from below), post-communist Russia has witnessed the development of an intense institutional racism (racism from above), which interacts with, and perpetuates, the former. The combination of the two forms of racism produces a climate of hostility in which visible minorities, and, in particular, Muslims feel unwelcome and, at times, threatened.

The reasons for the transformation of Russian attitudes toward visible minorities, particularly Muslims, are multifarious and complex. The social and economic upheaval caused by the collapse created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among ordinary Russians. The first Chechen war in 1994 exacerbated the already turbulent economic and political climate of the country. Further, terrorist attacks in Moscow in the mid to late 1990's, for which Chechens claimed responsibility, created a culture of suspicion and tension between Russians and Caucasians. The threat of terrorism continues to loom large in Russia, and the 2004 attack on a middle school in Beslan has only intensified the reality of this threat. Like many European countries living with the fear of Islamist terrorism, Russia has sought to protect itself from potential dangers by toughening its stance on migration, and by increasing its suspicion of Muslims. Lastly, as Russia is moving away from its Soviet identity along with its ideas of internationalism, it is moving in the direction of its European neighbours by embracing the concept of the nation-state. This entails re-imagining Russia as a Russian community.

In this chapter I examine the ways in which official and popular racism hinders Afghan integration into St. Petersburg society. I begin with an overview of race relations

during Soviet times before describing the transformation of official and popular attitudes towards non-Russians after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I argue that the intersection of these two types of racism is a post-Soviet development which perpetuates racially-motivated verbal and physical attacks on non-Russian minorities. Further, certain events such as the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings and the Chechen wars have helped precipitate the demonization of Islam in Russia. Islamophobia has become prevalent in post-communist Russia, as it has in post-Cold War Europe, and impacts directly on the daily lives of St. Petersburg's Muslim Afghan minority. My informants' testimonies will then illustrate the obstacles that confront them on a daily basis as they negotiate a space for themselves in a city whose inhabitants are largely hostile to them, as well as how members of the community react to this hostility. Finally, I examine the idea of the Afghan diaspora in St. Petersburg as a community in transit whose members neither call the city home nor feel at home within its borders.

Russia's relations with Muslim and other non-Slavic minorities have always been complex. They changed significantly throughout the Soviet period, depending on both the head of the Soviet state and the political circumstances surrounding that person's leadership. The Bolsheviks viewed religion, including Islam, with hostility, as it was incompatible with socialist ideology. Initially, however, the Bolsheviks refrained from any overt anti-Islamic policies; their first campaign to promote atheism in 1918 targeted Orthodox Christianity. Rather than declaring a full-scale war on religion, Lenin's Bolsheviks stressed the separation of church and state and the need for "making religion a 'private affair'". This sound strategy allowed the Bolsheviks to avoid a "nationwide,

popular anti-Bolshevik Islamic revolt,” and hence, consolidate their power in Muslim areas.¹⁴³

By the mid-1920's, the relatively liberal approach of Lenin's Bolsheviks was replaced by Stalin's aggressive assaults on any expression of religious identity as he emphasized the need to build 'socialism in one country.' Both Orthodox Christianity and Islam were targeted in attempts to obliterate religious identity, but Islam was the focus of particularly harsh attacks because Stalin considered it backward, reactionary and "anathema to Communist ideology."¹⁴⁴ By 1930 he had launched his anti-Islamic campaign in full force, ordering the closure of mosques, *madrasas*, and *mektebs*, and conducting highly publicized burnings of Islamic literature.¹⁴⁵ Members of national minorities, many of them Muslim, were originally promoted as part of the Bolsheviks' *korenizatsiia* (indigenization or nativization) policy. *Korenizatsiia* became the focal point of the Soviet nationalities policy and was supposed to make "Soviet power seem 'native', 'intimate', 'popular', 'comprehensible'", thereby dispelling notions of Russian imperialism.¹⁴⁶ However, during the 1930's, many of these Muslim communist leaders lost their positions and often their lives in Stalin's Great Purges.¹⁴⁷

Muslims witnessed a relaxation in the Soviet government's religious policies during and after the Great Patriotic War as well as during perestroika.¹⁴⁸ In order to

¹⁴³ Galina Yemelianova. "Islam in Russia: an Historical Perspective" in Hilary Pilkington and Galina Yemelianova, eds. *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p. 44

¹⁴⁴ Shireen T. Hunter. *Islam in Russia: the Politics of Identity and Security*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004, p. 25-6

¹⁴⁵ Yemelianova, p. 43-4

¹⁴⁶ Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 10

¹⁴⁷ Nayereh Tohidi. "The Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity and Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan" in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 25.1, 1997, p. 158

¹⁴⁸ Yemelianova, p. 47-53

ensure Muslim loyalty and manpower to the Soviet Union in its struggle against German aggression in the Second World War, Stalin promoted “supra-national Soviet patriotism” coupled with some major pro-Islamic concessions. Stalin reopened a number of mosques and *madrasas*, and lifted the prohibition on some religious practices and activities.¹⁴⁹ His approach was largely successful as the majority of Soviet Muslims remained loyal to the Soviet Union thereby preventing any rapprochement with the Germans. However, after the war and Stalin’s subsequent death, Islam once again came under attack from Soviet authorities.

Islam did not die out under Soviet persecution; the Islamic establishment was nearly obliterated, but ordinary Muslims practiced what Galina Yemelianova calls “parallel” Islam.¹⁵⁰ This ‘parallel’ or “non-establishment, non-orthodox” Islam borrowed from the tradition of Sufi brotherhoods, “which focus not on the mosque but rather on private prayer in the home or in unofficial houses of worship.”¹⁵¹ Although essentially six decades of campaigns against Islam had weakened the religion institutionally and intellectually, on an experiential level, Muslims continued their religious practice behind closed doors and prayer was confined to makeshift mosques and private residences.¹⁵² While they restricted any public demonstration of religious faith, Soviets never attacked the private practice of Islam; they tolerated it in exchange for Muslims’ loyalty to the Soviet regime.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 47

¹⁵⁰ Yemelianova, p. 44

¹⁵¹ Yaacov Ro’i. “The Islamic Influence on Nationalism in Soviet Central Asia” in *Problems of Communism*, July-August 1990, p. 52

¹⁵² Hunter, p. 33

¹⁵³ John Schoeberlein. “Muslim Hearts and Minds: The Contested Terrain of Central Asian Islam” at *Central Eurasian Studies Society Annual Conference*, Madison, WI, 2002

The second round of relaxation on Islamic religious practice came in 1988, over a year after the onset of glasnost and perestroika. It was spurred by Gorbachev's desire to gain support for his reform programme as well as his recognition that granting more religious freedom would improve the image of the Soviet Union in the West.¹⁵⁴ Gorbachev's religious liberalization directly contributed to Islam's revival in the Soviet Union. The Soviet media created space for Islam on television and in the press, allowing presentations by Muslim dignitaries, and giving Islam a higher profile.¹⁵⁵

The Soviet regime attempted to suppress religion while at the same time encouraging ethnic differences, as long as they were not religiously based.¹⁵⁶ In principle, Soviet propaganda imagined the Soviet state as an inclusive community founded on the friendship of multinational peoples, which prospered based on the principles of internationalism. Under Stalin's rule, racism was officially non-existent and Soviet rhetoric essentially attributed the indestructibility of this 'friendship of peoples' and the strength of its inclusive, raceless community to the communist party's promotion of each nation's uniqueness.¹⁵⁷ Yuri Slezkine compared Moscow's promotion of the development of non-Russian identities to a landlord doling out rooms in a *kommunalka*¹⁵⁸ for each nationality to decorate as it saw fit.¹⁵⁹ Nations were encouraged to display ethnic differences, hoping in this way to eliminate the danger of anti-Russian nationalism

¹⁵⁴ Hunter, p. 38

¹⁵⁵ R'oi, p. 51

¹⁵⁶ Terry Martin. "An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism" in Terry Martin and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds. *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 67

¹⁵⁷ Meredith L. Roman. "Making Caucasians Black: Moscow Since the Fall of Communism and the Racialization of Non-Russians" in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 18 (2), June 2002, p. 3

¹⁵⁸ A *kommunalka* is a communal apartment, common during the Soviet Union but still visible in contemporary Russia, where one family inhabits each bedroom and all families share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Many of these *kommunalki* housed three or four families.

¹⁵⁹ Yuri Slezkine. "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism" in *Slavic Review*, vol. 53 (2) Summer, 1994, pp. 414-52.

in the various Soviet republics.¹⁶⁰ Stalin's reasoning behind this approach was as follows: "We are undertaking the maximum development of national culture, so that it will exhaust itself completely and thereby create the base for the organization of international socialist culture."¹⁶¹

Although Soviet propaganda emphasized the equality of all member nations, in practice a very clear hierarchy of nations existed. At the top of this hierarchy of nations sat the Russians, who held all positions of real power. There existed a definite inequality between the Russians and non-Russians. The superiority of the Russians was never expressed in overtly racist terms but, rather, was couched in positive euphemisms such as 'big brother' to all the little brothers, or 'first among equals'.¹⁶² In these familial terms, non-Russians were portrayed as the chief beneficiaries of the Soviet system, without which they would be nothing, and they were thus expected to give "thanks and praise to their elder brother [the Russians] for their civilized existence."¹⁶³ Their status as little brothers meant that non-Russians were granted wide cultural autonomy but denied full political power; this was a right that was available only to the Russians as the elder or superior brother. Although in principle, Muslim Central Asians were granted the same status in the Soviet Union as Slavs and Balts, and some Caucasians, by being allowed to form union republics, in practice, the few non-Russians who could be found in the high echelons of the Communist Party in Moscow were most often of Slavic or Baltic origin, and sometimes Georgian. Muslims rarely, if ever, occupied these posts.¹⁶⁴ A clear notion of first- and second-class nationality therefore emerged in the Soviet Union, which

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 426

¹⁶¹ Martin, "An Affirmative Action Empire", p. 70

¹⁶² Roman, p. 4

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 5

¹⁶⁴ Yemelianova, p. 35

was in stark contrast to the idea of equality spouted by the propaganda machine. The reality was an “inequitable, hierarchical, imperial relationship between the center and the peripheral peoples’ with Muslims at the bottom of this hierarchy.”¹⁶⁵ Russia’s younger brothers were nonetheless expected to be grateful to the Russians for all of the opportunities that they were given as members of the Soviet Union.

According to the logic of Soviet rhetoric, the non-Russians’ foolish decision, in 1990 and 1991, to secede from the regime in which they were the primary beneficiaries could only prove that they had degenerated to their savage pre-Soviet existence. The little brothers had, instead of showing the Russians the respect and gratitude they supposedly deserved for providing them with their civilized existence, renounced their fidelity by seceding from the Soviet Union. It was, therefore, the ungrateful little brothers who brought about the end of the friendship of peoples. The official cultural images of Azeris as artists, Georgians as musicians and Uzbeks as dancers were quickly replaced in post-Soviet Russia by the popular, less-flattering images of Azeris as drug-traffickers, Georgians as car thieves and Uzbeks as weapons dealers.¹⁶⁶ These stereotypes of Caucasians and Central Asians as criminals and Mafiosi were hardly new; they existed in popular rhetoric even in tsarist Russia and prevailed throughout the Soviet period.¹⁶⁷ What was new was Moscow’s official dissemination of these negative stereotypes.

Although the Soviet system was not as egalitarian as it portrayed itself, it was nonetheless accepting and accommodating of non-Russians, and even of non-Soviets.

¹⁶⁵ Tohidi, p. 158

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 6

¹⁶⁷ See Emil Draitser. *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

Many people of colour, including some of my informants, talk of the warm welcome they received from the Russians when they visited the Soviet Union and of the, seemingly, egalitarian way that Soviet society was run. One African-American man whose family had been consistently persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups in the United States claimed that the Soviet Union was, indeed, a racism-free society. With respect to the racism-free nature of Soviet society, he wrote: "It is as if one had suffered with a painful affliction for many years and had suddenly awakened to find that the pain had gone."¹⁶⁸

In order to demonstrate to the international community that the Soviet Union was an inclusive, tolerant society, Moscow opened its doors to international students from developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Students who came to Moscow, Leningrad or Kiev from these countries were placed in dormitories (*obshchezhitia*) with other Russian and Soviet students and then enrolled in a year-long intensive study of the Russian language. They were then able to enter ordinary degree programmes with their Soviet counterparts. The Soviet government was responsible for all of these international students' educational, medical and accommodation expenses. Further, the government assumed all travel costs and provided each student with a monthly stipend to cover living costs.¹⁶⁹ Stories abound of the wonderful treatment these international students were given by their Soviet hosts. Some of my Afghan informants were students in the Soviet Union during the 1980's. Faribo, the Red Cross kindergarten's administrator, claimed that her introduction into Russian society was greatly facilitated by the welcoming and helpful attitudes of her professors. She has

¹⁶⁸ Allison Blakely. *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1986, pp. 88-90

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 134

particularly fond memories of her first year Russian language professor.¹⁷⁰ Faribo's husband, Mustafa, remembers how many of his Russian classmates went out of their way to help international students adapt to Soviet life. They took the time to help them with their Russian, and to explain to them the best ways to navigate the complexities of the Soviet bureaucracy. Neba, one of my key informants, lived in a dormitory room with one girl from Nigeria and two Russian girls. Although she claims that tensions existed between the culturally different girls, they never escalated into any type of racist conflict. The tension often revolved around the fact that Neba and her Nigerian roommate were uncomfortable with the Russian girls' male friends spending a lot of time in their room, sometimes even overnight. Although the Russian girls did not make an effort to find a solution to this problem, Neba said that they were nonetheless always polite and friendly with both her and her Nigerian roommate.¹⁷¹ Katar, Neba's husband, had close Russian friends while studying in Leningrad's university. He shared a room with an Uzbek and a Russian, both of whom he considered good friends. During his stay in Leningrad, he never felt unwelcome or afraid for his safety; to the contrary, he has mostly fond memories of his student days in the Soviet Union.¹⁷²

Many non-Russians nonetheless experienced intolerance or racism from Russians even during Soviet times. African students in the Soviet Union complained of occasional racist verbal attacks, the most common of which was being called a monkey. Although not an everyday occurrence, these racist incidents were common enough to be a nuisance.¹⁷³ Many of these international students claim that Russians living in the Soviet

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Faribo at the Red Cross kindergarten, July 17th, 2004

¹⁷¹ Interview with Neba at her home, June 16th, 2004

¹⁷² Interview with Katar at the Afghan café, June 26th, 2004

¹⁷³ Colleen Lowe Morna. "Innocents Abroad" in *Africa Report*, January-February 1988, p. 57-8

Union had a general mistrust of foreigners, which often caused tension between the two. One African student married to a Russian woman said that his inlaws boycotted the wedding and remained distraught that their daughter had married a black man.¹⁷⁴ However, in comparison to the treatment dark-skinned individuals now receive the Soviet Union seemed like the pinnacle of acceptance.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union saw the development of a new climate of intolerance. First, in the 1980's, Mikhail Gorbachev's policies, as well as the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation, jumpstarted an Islamic revival in the Soviet Union. The strength of the Islamic resistance in Afghanistan shattered the myth of Soviet invincibility and "enhanced the view of Islam as an effective instrument of resistance and liberation."¹⁷⁵ The Soviet Union's inability to conquer an apparently weak country like Afghanistan was a huge blow to Soviet and Russian prestige. The idea that Islam could be an effective tool of resistance against Soviet/Russian aggression was particularly threatening to the Russian government. Many nationalist Russians saw the withdrawal as evidence of the failure of Russia's "imperial destiny."¹⁷⁶ Second, with Gorbachev's reforms loosening restrictions on religious practice, Islam in the Soviet Union became more visible, and therefore, came to be seen by many Russians as more threatening.

The ethnic conflicts that broke out in Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and in South Ossetia in Georgia in the late 1980's also brought about a shift in Soviet discourse on racism. The media depicted these conflicts as little more than

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 58

¹⁷⁵ Hunter, p. 37

¹⁷⁶ Amin Saikal and William Maley. *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 69

fighting among “hooligan-prone elements.”¹⁷⁷ Yaacov R’oi argues that by depicting ethnic conflict as nothing more than “primitive, reactionary” disputes, the message is that “their grievances are hardly worth attention.”¹⁷⁸ The media’s depiction of the conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia as the result of hooliganism helped solidify the negative perceptions of the inhabitants of the Caucasus in the minds of the Russian general public.¹⁷⁹ Many Russians, finding themselves in dire economic conditions following the introduction of the new market economy, were overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness and fear. An influx of dark-skinned minorities to Russia’s major cities coincided with the decrease in standard of living and these minorities therefore became an easy scapegoat.

The image of the Caucasian and Central Asian as capitalist trader remained rooted in the Russian mind since tsarist Russia. Russian “racializing” of the market is a longstanding phenomenon; in colonial Central Asia, the market was identified with Muslims, whose products were denigrated by Russians as dirty and polluted.¹⁸⁰ Central Asian traders were condemned as “evil price-fixers” who “controlled supplies and regulated the money supply.”¹⁸¹ In the Soviet Union, Caucasian and Central Asian traders continued to play a large role in market relations. In Russia, during Soviet times, many were visible as semi-illicit small traders, purveying fresh produce obtained from the Caucasian black markets.¹⁸² While then Caucasian and Central Asian traders were

¹⁷⁷ Aleksander Iskandaryan. “Chernofobia” in *Novoe Vremya*, 1996, no. 32, pp. 12-14

¹⁷⁸ R’oi, p. 59

¹⁷⁹ Iskandaryan, p. 12

¹⁸⁰ Jeff Sahadeo. *Creating a Russian Colonial Community: City, Nation, and Empire in Tashkent, 1865-1923*. PhD dis. Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000, p. 89

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 424

¹⁸² Alaina Lemon. “Talking Transit and Spectating Transition: the Moscow Metro” in Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland, eds. *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 30

appreciated for making available items that were hard to come by, following the collapse they became a trope for all the evils of the new capitalist system.¹⁸³ Because of the capitalist nature of such markets on the fringes of the Soviet socialist system, many Caucasians and Central Asians were able to make a seamless transition from a command to a market economy.

After the collapse, these traders continued to earn money while Russians who had typically been employed in state enterprise found themselves jobless and without money. Afghans migrating to Russia's urban centres without legal documents soon joined their Caucasian and Central Asian counterparts as traders. A legacy of both the Soviet and tsarist Russian eras, traders are perceived as capitalist exploiters, criminals who buy low and sell high, setting unreasonable market prices all over Russia.¹⁸⁴ This attitude was prevalent in pre-revolutionary Russia with regards to colonial Central Asia. Since local Muslims dominated the marketplace, Russian settlers equated the pursuit of profit with immorality as a means of denigrating Muslim commercial success.¹⁸⁵ The idea that the pursuit of wealth is criminal has therefore remained entrenched in Russian society until the present day. An elderly peasant woman interviewed by anthropologist Caroline Humphrey sums up the typical Russian attitude towards traders: “‘What is the source of Russia's misfortunes? Traders. They should be put away. They make money just for themselves, not for society.’”¹⁸⁶ Of course, not all traders in Russia are Caucasian or Central Asian; plenty of Russian traders operate alongside their darker-skinned

¹⁸³ Caroline Humphrey. *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 71-2.

¹⁸⁴ Humphrey, p. 71-2

¹⁸⁵ Sahadeo, p. 273

¹⁸⁶ Humphrey, p. 72

counterparts. While the reality is that Russians trade too, the stereotype of the marketplace is that it is dominated by dark-skinned ethnic minorities.

The media consistently reinforces the stereotype that Russian markets are controlled by ruthless “black” (*chernye*)¹⁸⁷ traders or *perekupshchiki* (speculators) who criminally exploit honest Russians.¹⁸⁸ The majority of Afghan men in St. Petersburg are traders or vendors (*torgovtsy*) at the market, for lack of other employment alternatives. Although most of them earn very modest livings, Russians perceive them to be much wealthier than the average Russian. Russians often comment on the well-dressed children of Afghan *torgovtsy*; many insist that these children are far better dressed than are Russian children, evidence of the comparative wealth of Afghans.¹⁸⁹ This, according to Russians, means that all of these men who work as *torgovtsy* are making very handsome livings at the expense of the Russian majority. They are therefore perceived by many Russians as greedy, immoral, and dishonest. This stereotype is so entrenched in Russian society that even the two Russian women who work at the Red Cross women’s centre with Afghan refugees have commented on the shady business deals that Afghan men must be involved in to earn money.

Russians’ antagonism towards “black” traders, mostly Muslim, is epitomized by public accusations – reinforced in the media – that these marketplaces create *bezporiadok* (disorder) in Russian cities.¹⁹⁰ The stereotype of the market as a place of disorder and

¹⁸⁷ Russians use this disparaging term to refer to all people of colour who originate from the Caucasus, Central Asia, or even the Middle East.

¹⁸⁸ V. Malkova. “Multiethnic Moscow: Conflict or Consensus? An Analysis of Moscow’s Press” in *Research in Applied and Immediate Ethnology*. Moscow, 1998 #115, p. 1-25

¹⁸⁹ As a general rule, these children are not actually dressed any better than Russian children are. They are merely dressed differently.

¹⁹⁰ Humphrey, p. 90

chaos stretches back to tsarist Russia.¹⁹¹ Following the collapse, Moscow city officials seized on this age-old Russian stereotype and promoted the idea that Russia's former little brothers were the cause of the economic decline and *bezporiadok* in post-Soviet Russia. These notions, popular among local officials, have infiltrated the various levels of government and even Duma officials justify xenophobia against ethnic migrants. The following comment, made by State Duma Deputy V. Iliukhin, is a particularly glaring example of this: "Why are the migrants of today so actively penetrating all of the institutions of government, of the economy and others? Why should a member of the titular community not get what migrants get...conflicts are inevitable."¹⁹² The rationale behind this attitude is that ethnic minorities prosper while constraining the majority Russians. By deflecting the blame onto minorities, officials did not need to accept their share of the responsibility for the disastrous economy.¹⁹³ As a result of these motivations, as well as their difficulty dealing with the mounting crime in Russia since the collapse, Moscow officials both allowed and encouraged the promotion of anti-Caucasian and anti-Islamic stereotypes in the media, prompting the release of a campaign against "blacks".¹⁹⁴

The danger of promoting the stereotype of the ruthless *chernye perekupshchiki*, and, indeed, of all other negative stereotypes, is best illustrated with the example of the devastating pogrom on October 30th, 2001. A gang of teenage skinheads, frustrated by the perceived dominance of the marketplace by 'blacks' swept through the market near

¹⁹¹ Sahadeo, p. 424

¹⁹² Human Rights Watch. *The Rise of Xenophobia in Russia*. New York, 1998, http://www.hrw.org/reports98/russia/strusstest_03.htm#P113_18515

¹⁹³ It is important to clarify that racism is not an official government policy; it is, nonetheless, present to a large degree in many policies of the government.

¹⁹⁴ Iskandaryan, p. 13

the Tsaritsyno metro station in Moscow, killing three Muslim men and injuring many others, most of them Turkish and Caucasian.¹⁹⁵ A great show of public support for the Tsaritsyno attackers was broadcast widely on Russian TV news on the days following the pogrom.¹⁹⁶

In St. Petersburg, violent attacks on dark-skinned ethnic minorities have become commonplace since the early 1990's. Most of my Afghan informants gave accounts of at least one person they knew who was a victim of a racist assault. In January, 2001, Rana's husband, a Palestinian refugee who frequented the Red Cross, was beaten so badly by a group of Russian men that he spent nearly a month in the hospital. Two Afghan teenage boys were attacked in the school yard after classes by some older Russian schoolmates. The attackers took their bookbags and jackets after pushing them around and shouting racist slurs at them.¹⁹⁷ The father of one of the boys told me:

I never thought I would say this but I am happy my son has stopped going to school. Everyday I worried that something would happen to him on his way to or from school, or while he was at school. Something finally happened and thank God that he was not seriously hurt. I feel like we were lucky that this happened. Now Samir comes to work with me everyday and helps me or he spends his time at the ACC [Afghan Cultural Centre] reading and playing on the computer. I know that he is safe there so I don't worry. Of course I worry about his education but I am more concerned for his physical safety.¹⁹⁸

More recently, on October 2nd, 2004, the body of an Afghan pediatrician was found at a bus stop near a police station. He had died of head trauma after a severe beating. The

¹⁹⁵ Press Conference with Moscow Helsinki Group Chair Lyudmila Alexeyevna and Globalization Institute Director Boris Kagarlitsky", Federal News Service, 30 July 2003

http://proxy.library.carleton.ca:17364/universe/document?_m=af29590eb2e9479e62f538798f3835db&_docnum=11&wchp=dGLbVlb-zSkVb&_md5=24031da92c8de270cc9b7ec61f4f4177

¹⁹⁶ Christopher Kenneth, "Racist Upsurge Alarms Moscow Minorities" in *The Russia Journal*, Dec. 14th, 2001. <http://www.therussiajournal.com/index.htm?obj=5364>. I was in St. Petersburg at the time of this pogrom and I remember watching the news and seeing interviews with people who supported the removal of *chernye* from marketplaces.

¹⁹⁷ This happened in April, 2002. One of the boys subsequently quit attending school because he feared further harassment.

¹⁹⁸ Conversation with Nasser at the ACC, May 31st, 2004

man had been to the police station to collect his documents after they had been confiscated from him by *militsionery* in the street. The *militsionery* are the prime suspects in the man's murder.¹⁹⁹

According to the newspaper *Izvestia*, in the last few years there have been eighteen reported attacks on Afghan nationals in St. Petersburg.²⁰⁰ As a result of this violence, many Afghans navigate the city in fear. They will not go near Petrogradskaya metro station on the Petrograd side because this is the supposed stomping ground of skinheads. Many men will not attend the mosque, which, coincidentally, is located on the Petrograd side, for fear of assault. Nor will many men walk around in the street late at night, when Russians are more likely to be drunk and therefore more likely to attack them. Nor will they go to most sporting events. Their movements in the city are restricted by fear. Traveling around the city requires advance planning so as not to come into contact with potentially harmful people.

When I told some of my informants that I was going to a Zenith (St. Petersburg's soccer team) game at the sports arena on the Petrograd side, they reacted with concern. Fardin said "You shouldn't go there. It's dangerous. Soccer fans are Russian nationalists and racists. Even if they win, they riot." Neba expanded on this: "After these games Russians beat up anyone with dark skin who they see around. You're dark enough that you should be careful. I hope you're going with some strong men to protect you." Their reaction brought about my understanding that Afghan residents of St. Petersburg felt less comfortable in the city than I, a visitor, did. After living in St. Petersburg for less than six months, I was at ease taking cars by myself late at night and was not afraid to visit

¹⁹⁹ Elena Rotkevich. "V Ubiistve Afgantsa Podozrevayutsya Militsionery" in *Izvestia*, Oct. 14th, 2004, p.6

²⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 6

any area of the city. I had never questioned the potential hazards of attending a soccer game. We appeared to inhabit two different cities.

The Afghans' experiences in St. Petersburg became clear to me during my time in public places with Afghans friends. My somewhat dark skin tone made many Russians assume, when in the company of other dark-skinned people, that I was "one of them". Racist attacks were therefore directed at me as well as at the Afghans. While walking with Neba, Hala and their children around Prospekt Bolshevikov one day in July, 2004, we were suddenly assaulted by a shower of beer bottles that crashed to the ground near us. The sound of breaking glass was accompanied by shouts of "Apes! Gorillas! Get out of our city!" emanating from a balcony several meters above us. On a different day, in the same neighbourhood, I took Neba's 6 year old son and Hala's 4 year old daughter to a kiosk for ice cream. As the three of us walked down the street, hand in hand, a man waiting for a bus spit on us. I was aghast but, since the children had not noticed, I pretended that nothing had happened. These experiences instilled a sense of fear in me that I had never had in St. Petersburg in the company of my Russian acquaintances.

Once Caucasians and other people with dark complexions have been imagined as capitalist exploiters, it is not too much of a stretch to portray them as violent criminals. Law enforcers have fostered stereotypes among the Russian public of dark-skinned ethnic minorities as being responsible for the majority of crimes committed in Russia, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg.²⁰¹ The myth of the violent aggressive hooligans first spread by the media during the Karabakh and Ossetia conflicts is reinforced by police reports about crimes committed by "individuals of Caucasian

²⁰¹ Human Rights Watch. *Crime or Simply Punishment? Racist Attacks by Moscow Law Enforcement*. New York, 1995, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Russia3.htm>

nationality” (*litso kavkazskoi natsionalnosti*), a term that has become synonymous with all dark-skinned non-Russians. Simply having dark skin is often viewed by law enforcers as sufficient grounds for suspicion and in-depth identity checks.²⁰² Because of their belief that crime is committed mostly by “blacks”, local law enforcers performing their daily functions focus almost entirely on the targeted ethnic groups, ignoring many crimes committed by Russians. In this way, they find evidence of crime among visible minorities, thereby confirming their views.²⁰³ The media publicizes crimes committed by visible minorities much more frequently than those committed by Russians or other fair-skinned groups, thereby promoting *chernofobia*, or fear of “blacks”, among the Russian majority.²⁰⁴

Another reason that Afghans feel ostracized from the host society is because of the media portrayal of dark-skinned ethnic minorities and of Islam. News programmes portray Muslims in an overwhelmingly negative light, even if the story is about an Islamic holiday celebration. The reporting focuses on the “otherness” of Islam and on details of Islamic religious practice that may be particularly distasteful to Russians. In January 2005, on the day of the Muslim Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, news programmes focused their reports on the ritual slaughter of lamb that is an integral part of the holiday. They showed graphic images of Muslim men slitting the throats of cute lambs. Although Russians consume meat, they tend to be very fond of animals, and so graphic displays of animal slaughter are likely to offend them. Another focus of the Eid al-Adha reporting was the minor violence that broke out during the *Hajj* in Mecca. The

²⁰² Roman, p. 9.

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 10

²⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch. *Crime or Simply Punishment? Racist Attacks by Moscow Law Enforcement*. New York, 1995, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Russia3.htm>

Eid al-Adha commemorates the end of the *Hajj* but the news report did not emphasize the purpose of the holiday; it merely painted a picture of Muslims as unreasonably violent. Every news channel ran similar stories and craftily interspersed images of the lamb slaughtering with images of the violence near Mecca. The message that this sends out to Russians is that Muslims are a cruel and violent people. Fardin commented on the negative portrayal of Islam in the Russian news while we were watching the reports on Eid al-Adha. He claimed that Russian media influenced ordinary Russians into hating Muslims because of this type of journalism. He said: “Muslim affairs should really be reported on by a Muslim. These channels should hire a Muslim reporter to comment on anything that has to do with Muslims in Russia. This way Islam wouldn’t be massacred by Russians who hate it.”²⁰⁵ He believes, as do many Afghans, that Russian media deliberately foments hostility to Muslims so that they will never feel like they really belong in Russia.

The first war in the Muslim republic of Chechnya in 1994 provided fodder for the media to equate Islam and crime by deliberately overemphasizing the Muslim religious identity of Caucasians and Central Asians.²⁰⁶ The fear of Muslim crime and terror instigated a stream of protests opposed to the construction of mosques and Islamic centres in several Moscow communities.²⁰⁷ The demonization of Islam in Russia is symbolized by ‘Wahhabism’, an austere and fundamentalist form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia of which Osama bin Laden is supposedly a follower.²⁰⁸ Islamic scholar

²⁰⁵ Conversation with Fardin at his home on Eid al-Adha, January 21st, 2005

²⁰⁶ Roman, p. 11

²⁰⁷ Malkova, p. 7

²⁰⁸ Susan B. Glasser. “Russia’s Muslims Become Targets: Fear, Insecurity Rise Since Theatre Siege” in *Washington Post*, Dec. 23, 2002, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A27146-2002Dec22.html>

Marat Murtazin argues that Wahhabism is not a *mazkhab* (branch) of Islam at all, but rather a highly politicized religious movement founded by Arabian Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century.²⁰⁹ In Russia, Wahhabism has become synonymous with terrorism, and the term is frequently used to describe Chechen rebels.²¹⁰

On September 8th and September 13th, 1999, bomb blasts leveled two 9-story Moscow apartment buildings, killing over 300 people. Chechen terrorists claimed responsibility for the bombings.²¹¹ Immediately following the terrorist attack, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* ran an article which played on Russian Islamaphobia by warning of the rise of Wahhabism in Russia. The article portrays the general Islamic revival in Russia after decades of Soviet-enforced secularism as evidence of the increasing popularity of Wahhabism's radical teachings and its threat to Russia.²¹² The increase in the number of mosques and madrasas is said to be spreading fundamentalist Islam. To illustrate the evils of Islam, the author recounts the tale of a young man who chose to die for Allah, but not before killing many non-believers; as a result, Allah will admit him to heaven.²¹³ Susan Glasser argues that the media has sought to solidify the link between Islam and terror and instigate Russian hostility towards Islam by running pictures of local Muslim leaders next to photos of Osama bin Laden in newspapers.²¹⁴ Murtazin claims that the term Wahhabi has become such a popular term of abuse in contemporary Russia that any Muslim who "prays five times a day, fasts in the month of Ramadan, and

²⁰⁹ Marat Murtazin. "The Islamic Minority in Russia" in Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower, eds. *Islam and Central Asia: an Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?* Washington: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000, p. 129

²¹⁰ Glasser, p. 2

²¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Apartment_Bombings, accessed August 26th, 2005

²¹² Dmitri Mikhailin. "Wahhabism – ne prosto zlo, eto smertonosnoe zlo" in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, Sept. 28, 1999.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Glasser, p. 1

abstains from pork and liquor can now be accused of Wahhabi leanings.”²¹⁵ Hate crimes are increasingly directed at Muslims or those who are believed to be of Islamic heritage. John Russell quotes a journalist who claims that “the words ‘terrorist’, ‘Caucasian’, and ‘Muslim’ [have] merged into one demonic figure.”²¹⁶ Dark-skinned Muslims have come to be viewed as a criminal and dangerous element against which Russia must protect itself.

Popular police and crime dramas perpetuate this negative picture of Muslims. In 2004, a new police drama, set in St. Petersburg, became one of the most popular evening television shows. The show, *Ulitsi Razbitikh Fannariei* (*Streets of Broken Streetlights*), is aired every weekday at 9pm. In fifteen of the twenty three episodes that I watched, the antagonist, or main criminal, was Caucasian, Central Asian or even Middle Eastern, while the petty criminals, or employees of the big boss, were Russian. The implication of this is that even in the world of crime ethnic minorities are constraining the majority Russians. Further, it implies that dark-skinned minorities are the most dangerous criminals. Afghans watching Russian television are confronted daily with these perceptions of themselves as criminals and extremists.

In keeping with the Russian view of “blacks” as criminals, another common belief is that Central Asians and Caucasians, and especially Afghans, are drug traffickers. Russians therefore show little sympathy to dark-skinned victims of violent crimes as they assume that these crimes are drug-motivated. On February 9th, 2004, Khursheda Sultanova, a nine-year-old Tajik girl, was stabbed to death by a gang of Russian youth,

²¹⁵ Murtazin, p. 131

²¹⁶ John Russell, “Mujahedeen, Mafia, Madmen: Russian Perceptions of Chechens During the Wars in Chechnya. 1946-96 and 1999-2001” in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 18/1, March, 2002”, p. 79.

and her father and brother were badly injured. The newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* ran an article claiming that some suggested that the murder of the girl, which may have been a hate crime committed by skinheads, may also have been the result of her father's involvement with drug-trafficking, considering they were from Tajikistan and that the mother did not even work.²¹⁷ The comments submitted by readers online following the publication of the article indicated that many Russians were quite ready to accept the latter explanation.²¹⁸ One man claimed that Tajiks and others from the Caucasus and Central Asia sell drugs and kill Russian children; one woman claimed she didn't like lazy people who resorted to crime to get by; another said that it was unfortunate about the girl but why were Tajiks not in Tajikistan, where they belong? Still another blamed it on the "wild Caucasian mentality"²¹⁹, evidence of the fact that many Russians do not make a distinction between the different dark-skinned ethnic groups, lumping them all into the derogatory category "*Kavkaztsii*" (Caucasian).

Moscow's official methods for fomenting "*chernofobia*"²²⁰ among the Russian public are no less blatant. Local authorities and law enforcement agents, since the collapse, have been using a profitable and racist way to 'protect' their citizens against this 'black' Muslim threat. In St. Petersburg, as well as in Moscow, Krasnodar Krai, and Stavropol, the *propiska* (residence permit) system continues to be implemented at the local level. The *propiska* system is not a post-Soviet development. Rather, this type of internal passport system was used to control migration even in tsarist Russia, particularly

²¹⁷ Artem Kostiukovskii. "Kto Ubil Khurshedu Sultanovu?" in *Argumenty i Fakty*, February 11th, 2004, <http://www.aif.ru/online/spb/548/08>

²¹⁸ The *AiF* website offers a feature that allows readers to submit comments to each article. Their comments are then visible to other readers at the bottom of the article. In this way, readers may engage in dialogue about a particular article.

²¹⁹ "Kommentarii k Statye 'Kto Ubil Khurshedu Sultanovu?'" in *Argumenty i Fakty* (online), February 14th – March 11th, 2004, <http://www.aif.ru/online/spb/548/08>

²²⁰ Fear of "blacks"

to manage urbanization at the turn of the century. Although the system was abandoned before the 1917 Revolution, the Soviet government re-introduced a nearly identical one in 1932.²²¹ Soviet migration specialists viewed the *propiska* system as part of a scientific approach to population management and the best solution to the problem of overcrowded cities. Along with the Soviet internal passport, a *propiska* was required which listed the specific address of the holder. It was illegal to reside at an address other than the one listed on the *propiska*.²²² Further, a *propiska* was required for work, for access to social services and education, and in order to marry. From its inception in the 1930's until the collapse, obtaining *propiski* for Moscow and Leningrad was notoriously difficult. In 1991, the whole internal passport and *propiska* system was declared unconstitutional by the USSR Constitutional Supervision Committee. After the collapse, the Russian Constitutional Court abolished the *propiska* five times, yet legislatures in various localities continue to invoke laws aimed at migration control. Moscow and St. Petersburg, among other cities, continue to invoke the *propiska* requirement.²²³

In principle, the *propiska* system exists to protect these areas from all outsiders, even other Russians, but it is consistently invoked in a discriminatory manner in order to keep out "blacks".²²⁴ All visitors to St. Petersburg are required to register with the directorate for visas and registration (OVIR) where they are granted a *propiska*, or temporary residence permit. This, in theory, applies even to citizens of other Russian regions. However, in practice, "blacks" are routinely denied registration, and refused

²²¹ Susan Brazier. "Propiska" <http://www.nelegal.net/articles/propiska.htm>, accessed July 18th, 2005.

²²² Cynthia Buckley. "The Myth of Managed Migration: Migration Control and Market in the Soviet Period" in *Slavic Review*, vol. 54 (winter), 1995, pp. 896-916

²²³ Susan Brazier. "Propiska" <http://www.nelegal.net/articles/propiska.htm>, accessed July 18th, 2005

²²⁴ Human Rights Watch, *The Resident Permit System (PROPIKA)* New York, 1998, http://www.hrw.org/reports98/russia/srusstest_04.htm#P283_66695

propiski, resulting in St. Petersburg and Moscow remaining closed to “unwanted guests – Chechens, Caucasians, Central Asians, refugees from the Third World.”²²⁵ Without *propiski*, visitors are deemed to be in these areas illegally. The stereotype of the criminal “blacks” has therefore been successfully transformed by municipal officials into a self-fulfilling prophecy.²²⁶ Not only are these unregistered residents breaking the law simply by being unregistered, they are also barred from legal employment without a *propiska* and are therefore often forced to partake in illegal or semi-legal activities in order to earn income. Most Afghan men, who are without legal status and documents, are self-employed as *torgovtsy*. In this capacity, they are despised by Russians and accused of trafficking drugs or partaking in other illegal activities; yet, because Russians discriminate against them and prevent them from obtaining documents required to work as anything else, they become the despised *torgovtsy*. The vicious cycle, therefore, remains unbroken.

The *propiska* system also serves as a mechanism for law enforcers to enhance their meager earnings by extorting bribes from unregistered visitors. Because it is so difficult for non-Russians to obtain *propiski*, they often have to bribe officials at the OVIR in order to obtain the necessary documents. It is even more common for *militSIONERY* to extort bribes from those without *propiski* during random document checks in public places. Although technically all Russian citizens face the same problem, *militSIONERY* are well aware of the fact that a dark-skinned individual is much more likely to be without a *propiska*. “Blacks” are therefore constantly subjected to identity checks, searches, arbitrary arrests, and other sorts of harassment in order for law enforcement

²²⁵ Bronwyn McLaren. “‘Open Season, Closed City’ Rights Group Says of Capital” in *Moscow Times*, Sept. 6th, 1997, <http://www.moscowtimes.ru/archive/issues/1997/Sep/6/story5.html>

²²⁶ Roman, p. 12

officers to extract money from them.²²⁷ The threat of being stopped by *militsionery* poses another obstacle for Afghans; not only must they worry about locations where they are more likely to be harassed but time of day as well. All of my male Afghan informants leave the markets at the end of the day apprehensively. The most profitable time for *militsionery* to stop non-Russian *torgovtsy* is at the end of the work day when they are carrying home the day's earnings. Twice while I was in St. Petersburg in the summer of 2004, Fardin was forced to give *militsionery* his entire day's earnings, which were nearly the equivalent of fifty dollars. The poorly-paid *militsionery* can earn more money in bribes in one evening than their salary pays them in a month. Thus, not only is there no incentive to remove the *propiska* system, I would argue that there is actually an active incentive to continue to invoke it.

The failure of the Russian host society in St. Petersburg to affect the successful integration of the Afghan diaspora has resulted in most Afghan adults longing for departure from the city, and from Russia, in general. Although many of their children, born in the city, consider St. Petersburg to be their home, even those Afghans who have lived there for two decades do not call the city home. Memories of their homeland and stories from relatives living in Western Europe and North America have instilled ideas of these places as 'the lands of milk and honey' in the consciousness of St. Petersburg's Afghans. The result is a community in transience whose members have little desire to invest more than is necessary into their lives in St. Petersburg as they hope to leave sometime in the near future.

²²⁷ Human Rights Watch, *The Resident Permit System (PROPISKA)* New York, 1998, http://www.hrw.org/reports98/russia/srusstest_04.htm#P283_66695

For many diaspora groups, the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ are not synonymous. Avtar Brah argues for a distinction between “feeling at home” and “declaring a place as home”, however, she does not elaborate on what that distinction entails.²²⁸ I believe that there is an important distinction and I will therefore use her framework as a point of departure for a discussion of ideas of home and homeland among St. Petersburg’s Afghans. For my Afghan informants, “home” is Afghanistan, or, more specifically, Kabul; when they mention “home” they are referring to Kabul. I would argue that most relatively recent immigrants will always refer to their native land as “home”, even though they may “feel at home” in their adopted environment. Immigrants who are comfortable in their adopted land and are fairly successfully integrated may “feel at home” in the diaspora. In order to feel at home, one need merely feel completely comfortable in a certain environment, regardless of whether or not it is one’s place of origin. This requires that the host society provide a space for their free movement, unhindered by their ethnicity, within the social, economic and political spheres of their adopted land. Many Somalis living in Toronto claim to “feel at home” in the city because Canadian political culture has created such a space for them. St. Petersburg’s Afghans do not feel at home in St. Petersburg because the host society has made no such space for its minorities. In the diaspora, the Afghans’ homeland has been re-imagined as a paradise while St. Petersburg has become its antithesis.

To many members of this community, Afghanistan has become a sort of utopia, a paradise, where the weather is perfect and the fruit is sweet and juicy. Social historian James C. Scott argues that “assessing the present forcibly involves a reevaluation of what has gone before.” Just as Scott’s Malaysian peasants have “collectively created a

²²⁸ Avtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 197

remembered village and a *remembered economy*,”²²⁹ Afghans have collectively created a remembered homeland paradise. Their memory has become highly selective in the diaspora; it focuses only on the features that contribute to their argument that life in Kabul was better than life in St. Petersburg. Because they are unsatisfied with their lives in St. Petersburg, Afghans have lost sight of the hardships they faced which forced them to flee their homeland. Instead, memories of prestigious jobs, beautiful clothes, spacious abodes, countless relatives, and delicious meals have embedded themselves in many Afghan minds. The vibrancy of Afghan clothing, or the warmth of Afghan springs are compared to drab Russian clothing, or damp, unforgiving St. Petersburg weather. While Afghans sometimes recounted tales of the glory of particular events, such as weddings or holidays in Afghanistan, most of their reverie on Afghanistan was quite general. In St. Petersburg, the summer of 2004 was quite cold and rainy and the poor weather would often thwart our outdoor plans. Each time this happened, Hala would claim: “If we were in Afghanistan it would be at least 30 degrees and sunny. We would not have to spend the whole day indoors like we do here.” One of the favourite pastimes of Dina, Hala, and Saima is perusing photo albums of relatives and friends and reminiscing about their lives in Afghanistan. They all love to show me these photos and hear me remark on the stunning Afghan dresses they are wearing or the arid beauty of the Afghan vegetation. Hala would reflect on her wonderful job in Kabul and about how thin she was before she came to Russia. She blamed her weight gain on the fact that she could not work in St. Petersburg and therefore had nowhere to go and nothing to do but sit at home and eat.

²²⁹ James C. Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 178

Many Afghans blamed all of their current problems on some aspect of St. Petersburg and seemed ready to believe that anywhere else, life was better than it was there.

When I broached the question of St. Petersburg as their ‘home’ to this community of Afghans during our interviews, most of my respondents balked at the idea. Frishta said:

How can this be home when most of our relatives don’t even live here? And our husbands must worry everyday about getting harassed by *militsionery* and Russians? Some Afghans don’t even want to send their children to school because they are afraid they will get beat up by Russian schoolchildren. This is not home. Afghanistan is home, Kabul is home.²³⁰

Massi, whom I did not interview, was nonetheless present one evening while I was interviewing his wife Lida. He interrupted our interview after I asked Lida whether or not she considered St. Petersburg to be her home. “No Afghans will ever consider this place to be their home,” Massi said. “Russians hate us; they wish we would leave. We can’t feel at home when most of the residents of the city wish we were gone.”²³¹ Many Afghans echoed Massi’s statement that it was impossible to be “home” in St. Petersburg, where the host society was so hostile to their presence.

Afghans are quick to place blame for their hardships on the host society. However, their children’s opinions of life in the city are evidence that the host society is not the only element at play here. Many young Afghans, children and adolescents, view St. Petersburg differently than do their parents. Both children born in Afghanistan and those born in Russia claim to feel at home in St. Petersburg. Afghan children are better integrated into Russian society than are their parents because they are in close contact with Russian children on a daily basis. They therefore speak the language better than

²³⁰ Interview with Frishta at her home, May 30th, 2004

²³¹ During my interview with Lida at her home, June 24th, 2004

most of their parents and have a greater understanding of the majority culture. They have Russian friends. Many of them cannot even remember their lives in Afghanistan. While Neba stressed that she had been living in the city for around fifteen years²³² and yet could not really say that she felt at home, she pointed out that her sons consider the city to be their home and are very comfortable there. Her elder son, Omar, who is entering fourth grade, has many Russian friends and would rather spend time with them than with his Afghan friends. Because her sons are happy and well-adjusted in St. Petersburg, Neba says that she would not consider leaving the city while they were still schoolchildren. Most of the other women, she claims, do not really think about that and would love to leave anyway, regardless of how their children felt there. This, she says, is because “I have been here longer than most of them and I know Russian better and know the city better, so I can tolerate it. I am more comfortable than they are. Many of them speak Russian badly and don’t bother to improve because they hope to leave soon.”²³³ Neba makes an important point here; many Afghan women do not make an effort to integrate with Russians. As such, they do not allow themselves the opportunity to become comfortable in St. Petersburg. They simply wait for their chance to move on to another city.

This idea of being in transit was a common one among my informants. Whether most Afghans actually believe that they will soon leave St. Petersburg for a better life or whether they are merely entertaining a fantasy is unclear. Either way, their desire to leave the city impacts greatly on their integration into Russian society. Many Afghan

²³² Neba had come to Soviet Leningrad in 1985 but had returned to Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She fled Afghanistan for Pakistan, where her parents were settled, in 1995 and returned to St. Petersburg that year.

²³³ Interview with Neba at Hala’s home, June 19th, 2004

women are reluctant to invest much of their time into learning Russian and of forming any contacts outside of their insular community because they see themselves in transit to another country, usually a Western European or North American one. Most of my informants have relatives in western countries and their correspondence with these relatives has led them to believe that life for Afghans in the west is comparable to paradise. The west, like Afghanistan, has become a “land of milk and honey” for the Afghan diaspora in St. Petersburg.

Due to the numerous waves of Afghan out-migration over the past few decades, many Afghan families are spread out in various countries around the world. My informants have relatives in Sweden, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Holland, England and Canada with who they were in frequent contact. Hala’s brother in Dusseldorf phones her every two weeks, and Neba speaks with her brother in London at least that often. Fardin’s sister lives in Toronto and they speak on the phone about once a month, as do Faribo and her sister who lives in Copenhagen. From their relatives’ accounts of life in these cities, my informants have decided that their own lot in St. Petersburg is especially bad. Stories from relatives have convinced many of my informants that in the west, particularly in Canada, there is no racism and no poverty; Afghans all seem to have legal status, decent employment opportunities and nice living accommodations. Further, they never fear for their physical safety when they venture outside in any neighbourhood. Women are free to comfortably wear *chadari* (Afghan veil) if they so desire and even to wear Afghan clothing in public. Many Afghans in St. Petersburg readily believe in this western utopia and relate to me stories of their relatives’ lives of which I am sometimes skeptical. Fardin told me that his sister and her husband

live in a nice two-story house in Mississauga with their three children. Fardin's brother-in-law is a manager at a MacDonald's restaurant and his sister works part-time as a seamstress. It is unclear to me how they could have managed to buy a house in a town as affluent as Mississauga with their modest incomes. Faribo told me about her sister and brother-in-law who own an apartment in downtown Copenhagen. Since her sister is unemployed and her brother-in-law works as a customer service representative for a mobile phone company, I am also curious as to how they were able to procure such accommodation. I never heard any stories about relatives in the west who had poor living accommodations or a job that my informants considered less desirable than working as a *torgovets*.

A popular belief about life for immigrants in the west is that Muslims and people of colour do not experience racism. This belief is particularly salient with regards to Canada, where the country has been imagined as one which welcomes refugees with open arms and whose population is fully accepting and tolerant of visible minorities. But even Germany, England, Denmark and the Scandinavian countries have been constructed among Afghans as racism-free societies. However, studies of refugee and immigrant populations in many of these countries reveal that racism and hostility to Islam are quite prevalent in many of these societies. Maliha Zulfacar has documented testimonies of Afghan refugees in Germany whose experiences there are marked by exclusion and intolerance from both the German government and the German people. Few legal job opportunities are available to Afghans and often refugee families remain dependent on the German government's generous refugee social assistance programmes.²³⁴ Their

²³⁴ Maliha Zulfacar. *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany: A Comparative Analysis of the Use of Ethnic Social Capital*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1997, pp. 90-101

experiences are therefore also characterized by dependence and feelings of hopelessness. Further, after 1987, the German government became much more restrictive in issuing refugee status to Afghans arriving in Germany. As a result, nearly 75% of Afghan refugees who arrived in 1988 or later are illegal refugees with no work permit or access to social services.²³⁵

Neither is England the racism-free country that many St. Petersburg Afghans have imagined it to be. Rima Berns McGown's Somali informants testified to experiencing both overt and covert racism in London on a daily basis. Somali immigrants in London are alienated and ghettoized; none feel at home in the city and many even say that life as a visible minority there is unliveable. Britain is imagined by Britons as a white Christian society which leaves little room for non-white, non-Christian minorities.²³⁶ This is reflected in the British immigration and refugee laws which grant a refugee not full refugee status but exceptional leave to remain (ELR). ELR may only be commuted to permanent residence after a period of residency in the country of seven years and it does not allow for education over the age of sixteen or for family sponsorship. Somalis, most of whom occupy this ambiguous status, feel that they are in limbo in a country where they are unwelcome.²³⁷

Canada is said by the majority of Berns McGown's Somali informants to be tolerant in comparison to the rest of the world. Most feel at home in Toronto. However, they all stress that Canada is far from perfect; racism, although covert, still exists, and one Somali man was beat up by Canadian teenagers because of his race. Another young Somali woman was told an apartment was vacant and when she arrived to view it, the

²³⁵ Ibid, p. 92

²³⁶ Berns McGown, p. 161-96

²³⁷ Ibid, p. 188

landlord told her it had been taken. Her white friend went to see the apartment later that day and found out it was still available. Although racism does exist in a more latent form in Canada, it is not considered acceptable to be a racist in Canadian society. Berns McGown claims that Canadian multiculturalism has fostered a “Myth of Tolerance” among its population; they believe that they are more open to cultural, religious, and ethnic differences than Americans or Europeans. While this may be a contentious point, Berns McGown argues that the very existence of the “Myth” is critical to Canadian identity and so actually creates a more tolerant society.²³⁸ This does not mean, however, that Canada is the racism-free utopia that St. Petersburg Afghans have imagined it to be. It is, nonetheless, much more accepting of immigrants than Russia, which makes it a desirable place to live for Afghans.

The reality of everyday life in Russia for ethnic minorities coupled with ideas of paradise in the west have created amongst St. Petersburg’s Afghans a community in flux, one whose members have living accommodations, employment, and at least a basic knowledge of the local language, but virtually no connection to city, the country or the culture. Members of the community feel alienated and excluded from the majority culture and appear to merely be waiting for the first available opportunity to settle elsewhere.

Overall, the situation for Afghans in St. Petersburg may appear bleak. Russia’s political culture does not encourage the integration of non-Russian minorities, especially of Muslims. Attitudes and actions of the federal and municipal governments, the media, and the Russian people themselves have fostered a climate of hostility and intolerance

²³⁸ Ibid, p. 164-5

towards visible minorities, which has, in turn, hindered the successful integration of the Afghan diaspora into the majority culture. However, simply blaming the host society for Afghans' hardships would be shortsighted as there are many complex factors at play here. The interaction of majority and minority in the post-Soviet Russian context is unique; it must not be forgotten that the host society itself has just recently emerged from the throes of a major economic, social and political transition. The lives of most Russians were thrown into turmoil after the collapse of the Soviet Union and they were therefore forced to deal with a level of uncertainty and unfamiliarity of their surroundings that rivaled what arriving Afghans were experiencing. Afghan refugees coming to St. Petersburg in the 1990's were therefore confronted with a population which was itself undergoing a momentous transformation and adaptation. While I am not attempting to justify xenophobic attitudes among Russians, I do argue that Russians' experiences since the collapse cannot be ignored if we are to come to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the host society and its immigrants. Further, Russians are not alone in developing increased suspicion of Muslims. Over the past decade, Russians' counterparts in Western Europe and North America have witnessed several major Islamist terrorist attacks that have sparked a culture of fear and hostility towards Islamic immigrants in these areas as well. Consequently, many of these countries, as host societies, have also had difficulty with affecting the harmonious integration of their Muslim minorities. Russians' attitudes towards Afghans must therefore be recognized as forming part of a general post-Cold War trend that has developed in much of the western world.

We must also recognize that members of immigrant communities do not lack agency. Afghans themselves are not passive victims of institutional and sociological racism. To the contrary, they play an active role in their own alienation and isolation. Because they feel that they are unwelcome in St. Petersburg, they blame most hardships which they encounter in their new environment on the intolerance of the host society. Many women make no effort to integrate or even to learn the Russian language, thereby restricting the development of potential relationships with Russians. They justify this lack of effort by insisting that they are only in St. Petersburg temporarily. Temporarily can nevertheless be a long time and it is in Afghans' best interest to foment relationships with members of the host society. While it is important to recognize the role of the host society in affecting integration, the willingness of immigrants themselves to integrate with the majority should not be downplayed.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Eid-al-Adha & “Fabrika”: The Adaptation of Afghans’ Religious Practice to Life in St. Petersburg

One of the greatest challenges confronting St. Petersburg’s Afghans is continuing to live a Muslim life in a non-Muslim and highly secular city. All diaspora Muslims must adapt their religious practice to be conducive to their new environment. This requires much negotiation and compromise, at once within the diaspora community, between it and the host society, and between it and other minority groups. Barbara Daly Metcalf argues that the creation of space for the practice of Islam is an essential component of Muslims’ adaptation to any non-Muslim environment.²³⁹ This chapter explores the religious adaptation of St. Petersburg’s Afghans by examining how Afghans’ make room for daily religious practices such as prayer and ensure the consumption of *halal* (obligatory or permitted for Muslims²⁴⁰) food. My informants’ testimonies illustrate how they have adapted the celebration of Islamic holidays to their new environment and how they struggle to raise Muslim children. Female Afghans are faced with the additional burden of transforming their dress. They must choose between their desire to maintain a modest Islamic appearance and their desire to blend in with both other Muslim women in St. Petersburg – who do not wear *hijab* – and with Russian

²³⁹ Barbara Daly Metcalf. “Introduction” in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed. *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 1-27

²⁴⁰ Ruth Mandel. “A Place of Their Own: Contesting Spaces and Defining Places in Berlin’s Migrant Community” in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed. *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 151

women. Their desire to be inconspicuous in a society that is not very accepting of them has been a major factor in their decision to abandon their Afghan *chadari*.²⁴¹

St. Petersburg's Afghans were not as religious as many of their co-nationals in their homeland, and, among Afghan refugees, many of the more religious tended to immigrate to Pakistan or Iran. Nonetheless, nearly all of my informants admit to a decrease in religiosity in their new environment. Many no longer fully observe the five pillars of Islam.²⁴² I argue that this is partly the result of the host society's suspicion of Islam and partly because Russian (*Rossiskie*) Muslims, who are not devout followers of Islam, have set the norms for Islamic religious practice within the city. This is due, in part, to the fact that Islam in the regions that became part of the Russian empire never had the same public face that it had in other Muslim areas such as the Middle East. This, coupled with official Soviet restrictions on religious practice, led to the fact that most of the Soviet Union's Muslims do not observe all five pillars of Islam and usually only the *shahada* (affirmation of faith) was followed by all. While the majority continue to practice *sunnet* (circumcision) and observe Islamic rituals for weddings, divorce and funerals,²⁴³ the norm among Muslim minorities in St. Petersburg is a more discreet Islamic identity where women do not veil and men do not pray at work or dress differently from non-Muslims.

²⁴¹ A *chadari* is a headscarf worn by many Afghan urban women. It covers the hair but is not pinned at the chin; rather, it is draped across the neck and over the shoulder so that some of the neck is visible.

²⁴² The five pillars of Islam are: 1) *al-shahada*: declaration of faith in Allah alone; 2) *al-salat*: five daily prayers; 3) *al-saum*: fasting (typically in Ramadan); 4) *al-hajj*: pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina at least once in a lifetime; 5) *al-zakat*: almsgiving. Taken from Elena Omel'chenko and Gusel' Sabirova, "Practising Islam: Rituals, Ceremonies and the Transmission of Ethno-Islamic Values" in Hilary Pilkington & Galina Yemelianova (eds), *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p. 184

²⁴³ Galina Yemelianova. "Islam in Russia: an Historical Perspective" in Hilary Pilkington and Galina Yemelianova, eds. *Islam in Russia: Public and Private Faces*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p. 52

On top of this, some members of the Afghan diaspora were also ‘Soviet’ Muslims themselves, having arrived in St. Petersburg during the 1980’s in order to study at the State University; these early arrivals set the norms for their particular community, which were the same norms followed by the city’s various other Muslim groups. These ‘Soviet’ Afghans were among the less religious in their homeland hence their willingness to study in a secular society. For these reasons, refugees arriving in St. Petersburg from Afghanistan since the collapse are confronted with an Afghan diaspora community that does not strictly observe all five pillars of Islam or visibly differentiate itself from either other Muslim minorities or the Russian majority; as such they choose to follow the norms of their community by decreasing their religiosity. Their religious adaptation is therefore a two-pronged process; on the one hand, they must conform to standards considered acceptable to the majority culture, and, on the other hand, they feel a need to blend in with the other Muslim minority communities in the city.

Finally, I suggest that the nature of this process of adaptation is highly gendered. The burden of maintaining an Islamic household and of raising children to be good Muslims essentially falls on women; the men tend to be more *laissez faire* when it comes to their own practice of Islam, but are adamant that their wives uphold their responsibilities as good Muslim women. These responsibilities, a simple part of life in Afghanistan, become problematic and often contentious while living in St. Petersburg. Women are faced with the necessity of developing new strategies to deal with the challenges to their lives as Muslim wives and mothers in an essentially secular society.

Afghan men and women have made their religious practice a private affair in order to fit a society that is not wholly tolerant of them, and to conform to the standards set by their less-observant co-religionists already established in St. Petersburg. This means that holiday celebrations now take place almost uniquely within the domestic sphere, or in the purely “Afghan” Red Cross kindergarten, and prayer is confined to the home. For Afghans, the relegation of holiday celebrations to the private sphere is a very significant change, and one which is quite disappointing to them. In Afghanistan, holidays were major public events and everyone had the day off work so as to partake in the festivities. Mosques overflowed with worshippers and people were visible in the streets making their way to various relatives’ houses armed with gifts and provisions for the festivities. To the contrary, in St. Petersburg, holidays had become a rather lifeless imitation of their former vibrant, colourful selves. The men work on holidays and do not attend mosque. Some women complained that they did not even feel like celebrating in this city; they found it sad to be away from their relatives, and they “weren’t in a holiday mood”.²⁴⁴ Because in Afghanistan the celebration of major Islamic holidays entailed huge gatherings of relatives and extended family, the major complaint of Afghan women about their holiday celebrations in the diaspora was the absence of their numerous relatives. Samira told me that “holidays here are boring. My family is mostly in Pakistan and Germany. I haven’t seen them in nearly ten years.”²⁴⁵ Holidays reminded my informants that their families were spread out across the globe and it would likely be a long time before they would be reunited. They did, nonetheless, celebrate these holidays and they did the best they could to make them joyous occasions.

²⁴⁴ Celebrating Eid al-adha at the Red Cross, January 21st, 2005

²⁴⁵ Interview with Samira at her home, January 25th, 2005

Holiday celebrations in the diaspora have been modified in content to include elements of the majority culture, including Russian food and Russian pop music. At the Red Cross kindergarten, Afghan women and children celebrate their holidays from early afternoon to around 5 or 6pm. I participated in four of these holiday celebrations. Women and children dress up in their traditional Afghan clothes which are brightly coloured and made from elaborately woven cloth. The main activity at every one of these celebrations is eating; so much food is brought to the table that not even fifty people can finish it all, although everyone eats copious amounts of whatever is being served. While all of the food that is consumed in the space is *halal* and no pork is ever consumed on the premises, the women always include some typical Russian dishes along with the traditional Afghan fare. The feasts include the usual Afghan staples of *plov* (a rice dish) with raisins and carrots, and thin potato-and-onion-filled crepes. Various colourful vegetable dishes decorate the table such as salad with cucumber, tomato, onion and dill, a spicy spinach concoction, and white beans in a thick, sweet, tomato-based sauce. These simple dishes accompany copious amounts of lamb and roast chicken with rice pudding and Afghan cakes for dessert. Russian favourites such as beef *kotlety*, garlic fried toast with hard boiled egg slices and fresh dill as garnish, and *olivye*, a salad of potatoes, carrots, sausage (which Afghans have replaced with chicken), peas, mayonnaise and dill, decorate the table alongside the Afghan menu. Women insisted they prepared Russian dishes for Afghan holidays because their children enjoyed them and often requested them.

Besides eating, the other major activity at these holiday celebrations is listening to music and dancing, and even this aspect includes Russian elements. The large room of

the kindergarten is transformed to allow a group of around 40, including the children, to dance by setting up the tables and chairs along one wall for dining and leaving the rest of the room open for free movement. Although the festivities begin with popular Afghan holiday music, as soon as the children have eaten they request Russian pop music. In their colourful Afghan clothing, the youth then dance around singing along to Russian pop hits.

Youth are what links Russian culture to Afghan holiday celebrations. Youth want Russian food and Russian music. This generational theme recurs often in the context of Islam and diasporic identity. Many of these Afghan youth were either born in Russia or immigrated when they were very young. They have little recollection of their lives in their homeland and, as such, do not have a great appreciation for Afghan cultural elements like traditional holiday music. They watch television in Russian, and, like their Russian classmates, they are familiar with all of the latest hit songs on Russian MTV. While Afghan women express much concern with instilling in their offspring a respect of and appreciation for their Islamic Afghan heritage, they nonetheless willingly incorporate Russian food and music into their Islamic Afghan holiday celebrations.

Unlike their wives and children, Afghan men did little to celebrate holidays. They did not even participate in the major ritual of one of the most important Islamic holidays, the Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice), which celebrates the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca. One of the main foci of the Eid al-Adha is the ritual slaughter of lamb, hence the name of the holiday. This ritual is performed as a symbolic reminder of the biblical story in which Allah asks Ibrahim to sacrifice his first-born son as evidence of his devotion to his God. As Ibrahim wields the knife to perform the act, Allah replaces the

infant on the altar with a lamb, thereby sparing the life of Ibrahim's son. Muslims around the world sacrifice lamb to Allah on this holiday, and then feast on the animal's meat. Although Afghan men ate lamb on this holiday, they bought it from Tajik meat vendors near their workplace. This is in contrast to St. Petersburg's other Muslim groups. For example, the ritual slaughter of the lamb is an essential part of the holiday celebration for the Tajik community in St. Petersburg. Tajik men even rent out a space near the mosque for the slaughter and the ensuing celebration, thereby making their holiday semi-public.

In January 2005, I spent my afternoon celebrating the Eid al-Adha with the Afghan women and children and then I went over to my Tajik friends' house to continue the celebration with them. While conversing with my Tajik friend's son, I was surprised to hear that all of the men present had been to the mosque and then participated in the slaughter before making the rounds of various Tajik homes where the women had prepared elaborate meals for the festivities. The men traveled from house to house in groups, carrying large chunks of cooked lamb from the slaughter to be served with the other dishes. The Tajik men were dressed in traditional Tajik clothing, but they had not traveled home from the mosque and lamb slaughter space dressed that way for fear of harassment by *militsonery* or the Russian public. The Tajik celebration of the Eid al-Adha nonetheless had a public component that was missing from Afghan celebrations. The fact that Afghan men did not participate in the lamb slaughter or engage in any sort of public festivities, therefore, had little to do with the perceived intolerance of the Russian majority. Rather, I would argue that Afghans, as non-Soviet Muslims, are outsiders in a city where most other Muslim groups are from former Soviet countries. Many of these Central Asian and Caucasian Muslims have been on Russian soil for

sometime and they have appropriated space for their practice of Islam. Afghans, on the other hand, as fairly new arrivals, the majority of whom have no experience of life in the Soviet Union, feel uncomfortable and unwelcome at these semi-public religious gatherings. Afghans' use of the public sphere for manifestations of their religious identity is, in this sense, circumscribed not by the Russian majority, but by other minorities.

Their position as outsiders with respect to other St. Petersburg Muslims is the main reason why, unlike the Tajiks, the Afghans did not attend mosque on the Eid al-Adha, or on any other day. Although they had all attended mosque regularly while in Afghanistan, many men claimed to feel comfortable either going to the mosque or being at the mosque near Gorkovskaya metro station. Massi said of mosque attendance:

I know that it is important to go to mosque. I went everyday in Kabul. But I cannot worship Allah properly in this mosque [in St. Petersburg]. There I feel like an outsider, like it's not really my mosque or my place. Maybe this sounds like nonsense but that is how I feel and so I prefer to pray at home and to celebrate with my family and Afghan friends. I don't need to go celebrate at the mosque with lots of other people whom I don't know.²⁴⁶

Mustafa, Araf and Nevid, however, insisted that, in reality, attending the mosque to pray was not essential to being Muslim; as long as one was a good person who was willing to help others, and who loved and respected Allah above all else, where one chose to practice Islam was irrelevant. Daly Metcalf argues for the “‘portability’ of Islamic ritual” in these new contexts by emphasizing that Muslim ritual and practice does not require a “‘sacred place’”.²⁴⁷ Further, she claims that among many American Muslims the term mosque “can be used of a group of people uniting for worship, rather than of a

²⁴⁶ Conversation with Massi at his home, July 26th, 2004

²⁴⁷ Daly Metcalf, p. 6

building”.²⁴⁸ For Islamic ritual, it is the practice and not the mosque that matters. Many of my informants agreed with this aspect of Islam and did not correlate mosque attendance with being a good Muslim.

While all of my Afghan male informants had quit attending mosque since arriving in St. Petersburg, many had also ceased praying the requisite five times a day. Many claimed to pray first thing in the morning when they awoke and sometime in the evening after dinner, if at all. They claimed that this was because they lacked prayer space at work. For many Muslims, including Afghans, the lack of both space and time to pray at the workplace was a new and unfortunate obstacle which confronted them in the diaspora. In Afghanistan all workplaces provided prayer space and even sounded the call to prayer at the appropriate times. To the contrary, in St. Petersburg, most Afghans worked in a large open market and would certainly not kneel down on their prayer mat in the middle of the market in order to pray while surrounded by Russians. My question as to whether men prayed at work brought several laughs, most probably a reaction to the mental image of every Muslim *torgovets* simultaneously dropping to his knees on a mat in the middle of Apraksin Dvor.

The lack of prayer space at the workplace is an issue which many diaspora Muslims must come to terms with. Anthropologists Moustapha Diop and Laurence Michalak researched black African and Maghrebi Muslim migrant workers in France and found that they were confronted with the same situation: they had neither the time nor the space to pray while at work. Their French employers were inflexible in allowing them to take prayer breaks while on the job; French society, like Russian, offers little room for

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 6

minority religious practice.²⁴⁹ The host society, in this situation, complicates religious adaptation. Because of the climate of suspicion surrounding Islam in Europe in general, visible displays of Islamic religious practice are frowned upon. Muslims living in European countries are not likely to find employers who will provide prayer breaks for them. Afghans would not dare pray while at work where they are surrounded by Russians who are wary of these practices. Equally important is the fact that St. Petersburg's other Muslim minorities did not pray at work either. Were Afghans to pray at work, they would not only be calling Russians' attention to themselves but also singling themselves out as non-*Rossiskie* Muslims to other Muslim groups. Once again, in this instance, I argue that the minority Muslim community, more than the Russian majority, dictates the acceptability of public Islamic rituals.

When metaphorical and physical space for prayer is not available, Muslims change the ways in which they practice their religion. Some Afghans combine the five daily prayers into one long session in the evening, as do Diop and Michalak's black African and Maghrebi Muslim migrants in France, who have prayer rooms in their workers' foyers.²⁵⁰ Several of my male informants, including Fardin, Oman and Arifat, claimed to perform the morning prayer and then another prayer before retiring at night. Some Afghans admit to having abandoned the daily prayers altogether. Katar informed me that, having lived in Soviet Leningrad for several years, where prayer was possible only early in the morning or late at night in his dormitory room, he had long since become accustomed to praying when he could. However, over the past several years, his

²⁴⁹ Moustapha Diop and Laurence Michalak. "'Refuge' and 'Prison': Islam, Ethnicity, and the Adaptation of Space in Workers' Housing in France" in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed. *Making Muslim Space in Europe and North America*. Berkeley: University of California, 1996 p. 84-5

²⁵⁰ Diop and Michalak, p. 85

praying had become so sporadic that he could not really say that he observed this pillar of Islam at all. Other Afghan men also admitted to the fact that they rarely prayed, except during Ramadan.

Their adaptation, or in some cases abandonment of, the daily prayer ritual, affected Afghan men in different ways. The men reacted differently to having forsaken one of the five pillars of Islam. Many insisted that, even prior to their immigration to St. Petersburg, they were not particularly strict about their religion, and although they loved and worshiped Allah and believed in everything written in the Koran, they did not worry too much about not praying five times a day. Fardin claimed that there was no correlation between a good Muslim and a Muslim who prays five times a day; according to him, many Muslims who pray five times a day are nonetheless bad people, who may lie or cheat or disrespect their wives. But others expressed guilt at this lapse in religious observance. Oman, in particular, seemed quite affected by his abandonment of the prayer ritual:

In Afghanistan, everyone prays at the same time. You don't need to remind yourself to do it at a certain time. Every public building has prayer space. Here, I guess I just don't have the time or the motivation to wake up so early to pray or to leave my work to find an appropriate place. Some people go to the ACC (Afghan Cultural Centre) because it's in the market but even there most people don't pray. It's small and crowded. I pray at home at night. I know that it does not mean I love Allah less just because I can't pray as often as I used to. But I often feel guilty. I feel that I have become a bad Muslim because of living here.²⁵¹

Oman was not the only one who felt guilty for not praying five times a day; several men claimed that although they do not consider themselves to be extremely devout Muslims, they nonetheless feel that by not praying the requisite five times a day they are not only disappointing Allah but also setting a poor example for their children. Once again the

²⁵¹ Interview with Oman, June 29th, 2004

generational theme is broached with regards to the transmission of Islamic values. These men recognized that in a secular city the only real Muslim examples their children had were their parents. Ironically, while being a good example of a devout Muslim was more important in the diaspora than in the homeland, most Afghan men had become less committed to the practice of Islam since their arrival in St. Petersburg. This reality was not lost on them. The men all followed the other four pillars of Islam; they fast on Ramadan and hope to undertake the *Hajj* at some point in their lives if they had not already done so. These men also recognized that a change in their religious practice and observance was inevitable when living in a non-Muslim environment. According to Oman “living in a new non-Muslim country means that we, as Muslims and as refugees, sometimes have to compromise. We have to change our lives a little so that we can live in this new place.”²⁵²

Some Afghan men have adopted a Russian cultural practice that is typically viewed by Muslims as a sin: the consumption of alcohol. Occasionally these men drink a glass of wine or champagne while celebrating a major non-Islamic holiday, such as the Russian New Year. None of my informants ever drank alcohol in their native land mainly because they claimed that it was not accepted and their relatives would not approve of it. There was a firm belief among many Afghans, said Oman, that drinking alcohol was indeed a sin; it was written in the Koran that Muslims should not drink. Since their arrival in Russia, however, some of these men, including Fardin, Oman, and Araf, three good friends, had all taken to occasionally consuming a beer or a glass of wine or champagne. Fardin firmly believed that as long as a man could have one drink and stop at that, then it was alright to drink; “Allah will not punish me for drinking one

²⁵² Ibid

beer.”²⁵³ I would argue that this change in attitude towards the consumption of alcohol is indicative of at least a superficial desire on the part of Afghans to integrate with the host society, since alcohol consumption is an important aspect of Russian culture. Equally important is the fact that most Muslim minorities in St. Petersburg, including Central Asians and Caucasians, tend to occasionally consume alcohol. Afghans are also demonstrating a desire to integrate with other Muslim minority groups. It is therefore a two-pronged process of negotiation. Significantly, even Afghan men who continued to abstain from alcohol did not condemn those who drank. Fardin said some Muslim men were so against drinking that they would not even sit in the same room as others who were consuming alcohol; he found this attitude to be rather extreme. Mustafa claimed that if an Afghan man were to go out for dinner with a Russian man, for example, it would be offensive for the former to refuse to sit near the latter simply because he wished to have a beer.

Berns McGown, in her research on Somali immigrants in London and Toronto, was confronted with both attitudes. She discovered that, although drinking was condemned in Somalia, some of her informants recognized that socializing with non-Muslims often required being in contact with one who was consuming alcohol. Others, however, in an attempt to avoid this situation limited their contact with non-Muslims to the bare necessity and did not socialize outside of their community.²⁵⁴ St. Petersburg’s Afghans preferred the former strategy. Fardin and his friends, who enjoyed a drink once in a while, modified their behaviour in order to accommodate certain traditions of the majority population, just as some of Berns McGown’s Somali Muslims modified certain

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Berns McGown, p. 73-6

dictates of Islam in order to adapt to the culture of the non-Muslim majority. My Afghan informants' altered views on the consumption of alcohol are a good example of the way in which this minority group has woven together the culture of the dominant group with its own culture, and, in so doing, has adapted the behaviour of the group's members.

Afghans nearly universally acknowledged that the most difficult aspect of their religious adaptation was raising Muslim children in a non-Muslim environment. Although many Afghans indicated a willingness to adapt both their social and religious practice to their new Russian environment, few wanted to compromise any of their values and beliefs when it came to raising proper Afghan Muslim children. My informants are quite concerned with the impact of the non-Muslim majority Russian culture on their children as they see their children becoming increasingly "Russified"; nearly all of their children preferred Russian film and television, Russian music, and some preferred Russian food as well. The women were nonetheless adamant in their desire to raise children to be good Afghans and good Muslims. For my informants, being a good Afghan child was synonymous with being a good Muslim child:

All Afghans want their children to be good Muslims because that is part of being a good Afghan. A Muslim child respects his parents and all his elders and obeys them unquestioningly. Muslim children love Allah above everything else and try their hardest to be good, honest and hardworking people. So this is what makes a good Afghan child.²⁵⁵

Afghan scholar Maliha Zulfacar elaborates on what makes a proper Afghan child: "A proper Muslim Afghan child preserves the traditional, ethnic cultural heritage of his/her

²⁵⁵ Interview with Frishta at her home, May 30th, 2004

forebears, and takes advantage of the more valuable things in his/her community, in particular, educational opportunities.”²⁵⁶

This aspect of religious adaptation is highly gendered. Women are the ones who are mainly responsible for ensuring the transmission of Islamic values to their children. Women are responsible for the education and upbringing of their children and for imparting an understanding of and respect for Islam. In Afghanistan, as in many patriarchal societies, women are the standards by which morality is judged, and therefore, it is women and not men, who are responsible for passing on Afghan and Islamic values to the younger generations.²⁵⁷ They were torn between what they felt was the necessity to adapt their practice of Islam to their new environment, on the one hand, and a desire to raise their children to be practicing Muslims who respected Islam and were proud of their Islamic identity, on the other.

Muslim women living in a predominantly non-Muslim city fear that they will ‘lose’ their children to the dominant culture. Afghans in St. Petersburg harboured this fear as did Afghan immigrants living in the United States and Germany. The strategies the St. Petersburg Afghans used to deal with this potential threat, however, were unique. According to Zulfacar, her Afghan respondents in the U.S. and Germany made it clear that they did not want their children to interact or associate more than absolutely necessary with non-Afghan children, or children of the majority culture. Frequent contact, they argued, would encourage their children to absorb the culture of the dominant group. This attitude was particularly salient among her Afghan respondents living in the United States. The fear that their children would become “Americanised” –

²⁵⁶ Zulfacar, p. 189

²⁵⁷ Nancy Hatch Dupree. “Cultural heritage and national identity in Afghanistan” in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23/5, 2002, p. 978

meaning that the individualistic value system of the West would influence them to abandon all sense of commitment and responsibility to their families – caused Afghan parents to restrict their children’s extracurricular contact with American children. They are not allowed to go to birthday parties or sleep over at the houses of American children.²⁵⁸ In contrast, Afghan mothers in St. Petersburg were not as restrictive of their children’s interactions with Russian peers. They worried about the “Russification” of their children just as much as Afghans in the United States worried about their children’s “Americanisation”; but most Afghan mothers felt that sheltering their children from contact with the dominant culture would just encourage them to view that culture as a ‘forbidden fruit’ which they would be even more tempted to taste.

All Afghan women have children with Russian friends and nearly all the women’s children had contact on a regular basis with Russian children. They interact with Russian classmates on a daily basis. The women therefore worry about the development of their children’s Islamic and Afghan identity. Neba and Katar have two sons, Omar, who is ten and Alvar, who is six. Omar attends school and will be beginning the fourth grade in September. Alvar has not yet begun to attend school. Neba told me that she often worried that her sons, especially Omar, who was more easily influenced by others, would abandon their Islamic identity because of lack of exposure to Islamic influences:

I worry more about Omar than about Alvar. All of his friends are Russian, he even says he likes his Russian friends better than his Afghan friends because his Russian friends are interested in space (*kosmos*) and his Afghan friends aren’t. He cares more about *kosmos* than about the Koran. Katar doesn’t think this is a big deal; he says it is just his age but I think it is more serious than that. I see other Afghan boys his age who are more

²⁵⁸ Zulfacar, p. 191

interested in Islam than Omar. They know that they are Muslim boys. Omar knows but I don't think he cares.²⁵⁹

Neba's concerns were reiterated by many Afghan women. Those with teenaged children were the most affected by these fears. Momena's daughter Ariza, eighteen years old, had recently begun associating with a Russian neighbour her own age. She was troubled by the prospect of this Russian boy becoming Ariza's boyfriend. When I asked Momena how she reacted to this fear she answered:

I won't tell her that she [Ariza] is forbidden from seeing him. It would be useless anyway because he lives next door and they run into each other all the time. But I have tried to urge her to read the Koran more frequently and I tell her to pay attention to everything written in it. I stress the importance of virginity at marriage and how this is written in the Koran. I want her to read the Koran everyday so that she does not forget the importance of Islam.²⁶⁰

Nearly all the women stressed the importance of reading the Koran and of Islamic education. They wanted their children to identify with Islam and felt that an Islamic education was the most desirable means for achieving this end.

Indeed, the role of education in raising Muslim children was of critical concern for Afghan mothers in St. Petersburg. They recognized that the home plays a limited role in the transmission of values to children; educational institutions often have more of an impact on the shaping of those values.²⁶¹ For St. Petersburg's Afghans, "education is where private and public interact"²⁶² and, hence, the classroom should be a space for the transmission of religious values outside the home. Afghans understood that the Russian public school system curriculum would obviously not provide Islamic religious instruction, but what was most problematic for them was that the content of the curriculum was often at odds with an Afghan Islamic world view. For example, the

²⁵⁹ Conversation with Neba at Hala's home, July 2nd, 2004

²⁶⁰ Interview with Momena at her home, June 10th, 2004

²⁶¹ Berns McGown, p. 103

²⁶² Ibid, p. 103

Russian school curriculum teaches evolution, whereas Muslims believe in creationism. Neba once claimed that Omar had rubbish in his science and nature textbook that stated humans had evolved from apes: “We don’t believe that. We know that that’s not how it happened. All humans came from Adam and Eve. Omar knows that what’s written in that book is rubbish.”²⁶³ In fact, Neba hoped that Omar’s identification with Islam was strong enough for him to believe that evolution was, indeed, rubbish.

In order to encourage their children to identify with Islam on a daily basis, Neba and many other Afghan women made it obligatory for their sons (and some daughters) to read from the Koran every day and to practice religious writings in their native language, which uses the Arabic script. Some of the boys were not overly enthusiastic about this extra homework; Neba’s oldest son, Omar, grumbled to me about how none of his friends had to do as much homework as he did. Saima’s sons, however, were proud of their knowledge of the Koran and were enthusiastic about doing their religious exercises whenever I told them I would love to listen to them read from the Koran. They liked to explain to me what all of the important figures in the Koran did, and why they were famous and they made me repeat their names and then corrected my pronunciation. I enjoyed this pastime as much as they did. Saima’s sons had few Russian friends and preferred to associate with other Afghans; the boys who complained the most about their religious homework were those who had lived in St. Petersburg the longest and had the most interaction with Russians. Some of the women, such as Lida and Momena were much more vigilant with their sons about the completion of their religious homework than about the completion of their actual schoolwork, whereas Neba was quite strict

²⁶³ Conversation with Neba at her home, January 10th, 2005. Interestingly, Neba is a doctor by profession, although she does not practice. She was educated in Soviet Leningrad in the 1980’s.

about Omar's performance in school. Both of these factors likely accounted for the discrepancies in the boys' attitudes towards their religious work. Nearly all women, even Neba, were quite vigilant about ensuring that their sons completed their religious homework. In this way, the religious education and upbringing of Afghan children was essentially the responsibility of Afghan women.

The Afghan women who frequented the Red Cross sought a compromise between a secular Russian education for their children and one Islamic in content. Their children attended school with Russian children but most were also obliged to partake in a weekly Islamic religious lesson at the Red Cross. After the regular school day on Friday afternoons at the Red Cross kindergarten, Rana, Momena's mother and the eldest of my informants, gave religious lessons to most of the school-aged Afghan boys, who ranged in age from 7 to 15, as well as to several girls aged 13 to 18. They would practice writing Koranic verses in Arabic script, reading from the Koran and from other religious texts, singing religious songs, and recounting Koranic stories. These lessons would usually last two hours. Afghan women told me that they knew of no courses offered for young boys on the teachings of Islam anywhere in the city. Even if they did exist, they would not be free; for this reason, they set up their own courses and Rana volunteered her services free of charge.

Many diaspora Muslim groups employ similar strategies. In some foyers in France, black African and Maghrebi Muslims use the prayer rooms as classrooms for children's religious instruction,²⁶⁴ while the children of African-American Muslims in

²⁶⁴ Diop and Michalak, p. 82

Philadelphia²⁶⁵ attend classes in the home of a volunteer. Turkish migrants' children in Berlin²⁶⁶ and Afghan children in the United States²⁶⁷ receive their religious instruction at the local mosque. Beyond the obvious goal of imparting knowledge of and respect for Islam, an important latent function of these lessons was also to immerse the children in their cultural heritage. Among St. Petersburg's Afghans, much like the holiday celebrations at the kindergarten, these lessons allowed the children to speak their own language, listen to Afghan music, and be exposed to social manners and other Afghan norms. Although the boys grumbled about the required lessons they seemed to enjoy spending time together at the kindergarten; they had the chance to unwind with rowdy playtime before and after the lesson.

These weekly Islamic lessons at the kindergarten served not only to expose children to their Afghan heritage, but also to teach them to comply with traditional Afghan value systems and habits. One of the fundamental aspects of an Afghan's value system is respect for and deference to elders and authority. Zulfacar calls the internal structure of Afghan society hierarchical and one which is based on "seniority and knowledge".²⁶⁸ This is manifested in the terms of address used by Afghans for anyone who is older than they are. All children are taught at a young age to refer to adult men as *Koka*, which signifies a close relationship to the father, and to adult women as *Khala*, demonstrative of close association on the mother's side. Afghans also consider it rude to address their elders by their first name; instead they use a complex system of kinship

²⁶⁵ Animah Beverly McCloud. "'This is a Muslim Home': Signs of Difference in the African-American Row House" in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed. *Making Muslim Space in Europe and North America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 68

²⁶⁶ Mandel, p. 153

²⁶⁷ Zulfacar, p. 194

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 29

terminology, both for the maternal and paternal sides. All Afghan children refer to their elders using these terms of respect. Afghan children are also expected to rise when an elder enters a room and to kiss the hands of elders in greeting. As their Islamic teacher, Rana demanded compliance with these norms. The children were expected to address her in the traditional Afghan term *Khala* (meaning mother's sister, but used by all children to address an elder woman), and to stand before speaking, for example. Rana was respected for her extensive knowledge of Islam and the Koran and she expected full obedience and submission from her pupils. They always accorded her the respect and obedience she sought and, indeed, I never heard even the most belligerent of the boys answer back when she spoke.

Rana's status within the community as an elder widow commanded respect; the children understood and obeyed her authority. As the eldest member of the community she was at the top of the hierarchy of seniority and knowledge. The diaspora experience does not seem to have given this hierarchy less salience; to the contrary, among St. Petersburg Afghans, Rana was unique in the sense that, more than any other member of the community, she represented the culture and tradition of the Afghan people. For the Afghan children born in Russia, Rana offered a glimpse into a world that was unknown to them; she represented a link to traditions that they themselves had never experienced, but that, nonetheless, formed a significant part of their identity as Afghan as opposed to Russian children. Her age and her life experience gave her more confidence in her ability to express her Islamic identity with little heed for the opinions of Russians or other Muslim minorities in St. Petersburg. Although she had been in St. Petersburg since 1998, she had nearly no command of the Russian language and did not make any attempt to

learn it. Further, she was the only one of the women who continued to wear the headscarf after her arrival in St. Petersburg. The headscarf Rana wore was flimsy; the fabric covered most of her hair, but wisps of it still poked through. It was draped around her neck in such a way that it covered the flesh of her neck and her breastbone but it was not pinned under the chin. Unlike the other women, who had given up the *hijab* for fear of calling undesired attention to themselves in a city where they already felt unwelcome, Rana was not concerned with making herself as inconspicuous as possible. Rather, she claimed that after having worn some version of the headscarf for her entire life, she felt naked and uncomfortable without it.²⁶⁹ She was not about to cast it aside just because she now lived in a non-Muslim country.

Since all of my women informants had worn some version of the headscarf while in Afghanistan, their decision to uncover in St. Petersburg was a difficult adaptation for many of them. In Afghanistan prior to the rise of the Taliban, urban and rural women both tended to wear different versions of *hijab*. Kabul's women often wore a version of the headscarf that resembled that which Rana continued to wear: it exposed some hair and parts of the neck and breastbone and was sometimes tied under the chin, or simply draped across the neck and over the shoulder. Being from Kabul, St. Petersburg's Afghan women had worn a version of the latter. Ariza said that when she and her family had first arrived in St. Petersburg, her mother, Momena, had worn the headscarf and her and her sisters had worn traditional Afghan dress; for young girls, this consisted of a brightly coloured, often patterned long, loose tunic over loose-fitting, straight-leg pants of the same fabric. However, both Ariza and Momena felt very uncomfortable in public in

²⁶⁹ I always talked with Rana using her granddaughter, Ariza, as an interpreter. Ariza's Russian was nearly flawless.

this clothing where Russians constantly pointed and stared at them. It was not long before Ariza, the eldest daughter, asked her mother if she could wear “normal Russian clothes”. Momena agreed, as long as the clothing was modest and, she, at the same time, abandoned *hijab*.²⁷⁰ When I asked her how she had felt about this change, she responded:

I can't say that it was done without a lot of deliberation. I am nearly 40 years old and I have been wearing the *chadari* for most of my life. At first I felt naked without it and very vulnerable. Even still, I have to say that I was more comfortable wearing the *chadari* than I am now without it. But here, it's really not possible to keep wearing it. It's like announcing to Russians that we're Muslims and foreigners, that we're strange, you know? Then they stare at us all the time and we feel very uncomfortable.²⁷¹

Hala also abandoned *hijab* shortly after her arrival in St. Petersburg, although she admitted reluctance in doing so. Like Momena, she claimed to feel uncomfortable without her *chadari*. This was the most common response the women gave about their abandonment of *hijab*.

Hijab becomes a contentious issue for Muslim women living in the diaspora. The attitude of the host society towards its Islamic minorities is a factor in influencing whether or not Muslim women immigrants continue to wear *hijab* in their new environment. The Russian majority's suspicion of Muslims is one of the reasons Afghan women have chosen to abandon *hijab*, which is the most visible marker of their Islamic identity. The host society's attitude is not, however, the sole factor responsible for this decision. I would argue that St. Petersburg's Afghan women are influenced to a greater extent by the practices of the city's other Muslim women and especially by those of members of their own community already established in the city. Since the norm in St. Petersburg is for Muslim women to be uncovered, Afghan women have felt the need to uncover as well. Were Afghan women to continue to wear *hijab* in St. Petersburg they

²⁷⁰ Interview with Ariza, June 6th, 2004

²⁷¹ Interview with Momena, June 10th, 2004

would be exposing themselves as ‘foreign Muslims’ to *Rossisskie* Muslims. Donning *hijab* would ‘other’ my informants from both the Russian majority and from the former Soviet Muslim minorities living in the city as well. Choosing to abandon *hijab*, then, has been a process of negotiation on two levels for Afghan women; on the one hand, they have accounted for how *hijab* might affect interactions with ethnic Russians, and on the other hand, with *Rossisskie* Muslims.

Most Muslim women in St. Petersburg, whether of Central Asian, Caucasian or any other origin, do not wear *hijab*. Soviet pressure on women in the Muslim republics to abandon all forms of the headscarf has resulted in the practice becoming nearly nonexistent. The headscarf was, for Soviet Russia, the visual marker of ‘backwardness’ and women’s oppression in the eastern part of its empire. The campaign to eradicate the headscarf was complicated and contested. While it was initially unsuccessful, Douglas Northrop argues that the “continual repetition and inscription of Soviet categories and language – all those heroic congresses, public demonstrations, and newspapers posted in town squares – did, over time, have an impact” on the Muslim areas of the Soviet empire. Indeed, by the 1960’s the headscarf had become the rare exception rather than the rule in most Central Asian homes.²⁷² Although it took many years, the reification of the headscarf by the Soviets succeeded in eventually reducing its visibility to the point where it became the ““museum piece”” long sought by party activists.²⁷³ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has witnessed a resurgence in veiling but Muslim women in Russia’s metropolises remain uncovered.

²⁷² Douglas Northrop. *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 348

²⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 348

Afghan women, having abandoned *hijab*, nonetheless offered various reasons for the desirability of veiling. Contrary to the usual conservative pro-veiling Islamic discourse which states that a function of the headscarf is to remind women that their proper place is in the home,²⁷⁴ they claimed that it earned them respect and freedom to navigate the public sphere. Many Muslim women are firm proponents of *hijab*'s powers of liberation from that domestic sphere. They claim that, rather than restricting a woman to the home, *hijab* allows her access to the public sphere while still maintaining the respect of men.²⁷⁵ Men, they claim, do not make advances at or ogle a woman in *hijab*, for they respect her commitment to Islam and her modesty. *Hijab* therefore affords her the respect and protection to engage in public-sphere pursuits without drawing unnecessary attention from men.²⁷⁶ Hala was adamant that wearing the *chadari* in Kabul had given her the power to work alongside men and maintain their respect. In Kabul, Afghan men, she claimed, do not respect women who do not veil (before the rise of the Taliban, it was not uncommon to see unveiled women in the capital) and, as such, treat them differently. Hala's claim that women in *hijab* commanded the respect of Muslim men was reiterated by Dina and Lida. Despite their attachment to their *chadari*, neither woman was willing to continue to wear *hijab* in a city where no other Muslim women wore it.

Religiosity also plays a significant role in the *hijab* debate. Women whose religiosity has decreased in the diaspora will likely find it less difficult to abandon *hijab*

²⁷⁴ For more on this, see, for example, Sheik Abdullah Ahmed Al-Swailem, "Introduction" in *A Comparison Between Veiling and Unveiling*. Riyadh: Saudi Arabia: Dar-us-Salam, 1995; Muhammad Iqbal Siddiqi. *Islam Forbids Free Mixing of Men and Women*. Lahore, Pakistan: Kazi, 1983; Abu Ameenah Bilala Philips & Jameelah Jones. *Polygamy in Islam*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Publishing House, 1985

²⁷⁵ Jen'nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartrowski. "To Veil or not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation Among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas" in *Gender and Society*, vol. 14/3, June 2000, pp. 403-5

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 405-6.

than those whose religiosity has increased. Muslim women who are more religious will identify very strongly with *hijab* as a marker of their Islamic identity. Living in the diaspora, the visible marker of their Islamic faith becomes essential to their new identities as foreigners and minorities.²⁷⁷ In this respect St. Petersburg's Afghans, who have become less religious in the diaspora, differ significantly from many other Muslim communities in the west, whose religiosity has increased. Ruth Mandel's Sunni Turkish informants distinguish themselves from both the 'immodest and sexually permissive' Germans and from the 'immoral' Shi'ite Alevi Turks in Berlin by *hijab*.²⁷⁸ Even those who did not veil at home donned *hijab* upon their arrival in Berlin so as to conform to the Sunni Turkish diaspora community's expectations. Afghan women in the United States who did not veil and who dressed in what was perceived as revealing western clothing were considered to bring shame on both their families and the larger Afghan community. As such, most women felt pressure within the community to wear *hijab* even though some of them had not done so in their homeland.²⁷⁹ Islam, in the diaspora, takes on new meaning for many Muslim women, including these Somali, Turkish and Afghan communities in the west. These women, upon being confronted with a foreign culture whose values and beliefs are largely alien to them, have immersed themselves in a rediscovery of their Islamic identity. Afghan women, on the other hand, express a desire to blend in with both other minorities and the majority. They have therefore chosen to abandon visible markers of their Islamic identity.

²⁷⁷ Berns McGown, p. 78-95

²⁷⁸ Mandel, p. 156

²⁷⁹ Zulfacar, p. 195

Two main themes emerge from an examination of Afghans' religious adaptation to life in the diaspora. The first is the role of both the host society and *Rossisskie* Muslim minorities in dictating the acceptability and the norms of Islamic practice. While Afghans themselves tend to emphasize the intolerance of the host society as a major factor in their decisions to abandon *hijab* or not attend mosque, I argue that, in fact, the city's other Muslim groups have a greater influence on Afghans' Islamic adaptation. Afghans have shown a decrease in religiosity in the diaspora because they are confronted with a local Muslim population which is not religious. Regardless of the attitudes of Russians towards Muslims, Afghans would likely participate in Islamic rituals if they did not feel isolated from St. Petersburg's Muslim community. Women would continue to wear their *chadari* if Central Asian and Caucasian women in the city also veiled.

The generational divide is the other major theme which is interwoven in all of the testimonies of these Afghans, both men and women. All are concerned with instilling in their offspring Islamic values and an understanding of their ethnic and religious identity, and the women appear to take great pains to ensure that their children obtain an Islamic education and study the Koran on a daily basis. Yet, ironically, Afghans themselves have modified or even abandoned many aspects of their Islamic identity which would serve as examples for their children. Afghan men occasionally drink and rarely pray, and they never attend mosque or participate in important Islamic rituals. Women incorporate Russian food into their traditional Afghan holiday menus and allow their children to listen to Russian pop music at Islamic celebrations. While Afghans desire to keep Islam among the youth, the youth are becoming increasingly "Russified" and the irony of this is not lost on them.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of immigrant communities in post-Soviet Russia remain understudied. Yet the recent history of this country provides an interesting context in which one can examine the adaptation and integration of these minority groups. Immigrants and refugees who arrived in Russia's major cities following the collapse of the Soviet Union were confronted not only with an unfamiliar cityscape, language, culture, and value system, but also with a host society which was itself in the throes of a major social, economic and political transformation. This situation provides us with a unique opportunity to study how the complex factors at work in shaping the diaspora experience of these immigrants can be affected by the transition.

One of the major arguments of this study is that the host society is a key determinant of the level of integration that immigrants can achieve. Russia, as a host society, provides little space for the unhindered movement of visible minorities within social, economic and political spheres. However, while Russians have employed a number of strategies to alienate Afghans, they have done so largely as a way of both protecting themselves from and making sense of the chaos that engulfed them following the collapse. This raises the question of whether populations in the process of major revolutions or transformations, economic, political, or social, are always destined to fail as host societies in allowing for the integration of minority groups.

Equally important to the outcome of the integration process is the immigrant community's reaction to their treatment from the host society. For their part, Afghans

have reacted to their perceived alienation from Russian society in such a way as to further ostracize themselves from the majority culture. The combination of the host society's treatment of Afghans and Afghans' reactions to that treatment contributes to the low level of integration of this diaspora community. No matter how tolerant the host society, if immigrants do not make an effort to learn the majority language, nor to cultivate any relationships with members of the majority, they will never be well integrated. Of course the flipside to this argument is that perhaps if Russians were more tolerant of Afghan presence in St. Petersburg, Afghans would have a greater incentive to take the steps necessary for successful integration. As we have seen throughout this study, the adaptation and integration process of this community is complex and dynamic; it is therefore inappropriate to single out one factor as the cause of Afghans' unsuccessful integration.

While this project has touched upon various aspects of the adaptation and integration of St. Petersburg's Afghans, some major themes emerge which have had a particular impact on these processes. First, Afghans' use of networks is essential to facilitating their acclimatization process. The existence of these networks, local, regional and international, is evidence of this Afghan community's membership in a worldwide Afghan diaspora. The use of networks among immigrants is an integral aspect of their diaspora experience beyond the initial acclimatization period. Many maintain regular contact with relatives abroad and often receive financial support from those who can offer it. Dependence on financial support from relatives links networks with another theme prevalent in this study: the effects of life in the diaspora on Afghan pride and prestige. This is a gendered aspect of diaspora life. Afghan men are greatly affected by

their change in social status from middleclass professionals to relatively poor market vendors in St. Petersburg. Their reliance on former “Soviet” Afghans for guidance in their new environments as well as dependence on financial aid from wealthier relatives has “feminized” Afghan men. The interaction of dependence, pride and prestige bring forth a third theme of this study: the importance of power dynamics. Power dynamics are renegotiated and reconfigured in the diaspora as different skills and qualities are privileged in Afghan immigrants’ new environment. A significant power differential has emerged between the “old-timers” – former “Soviet Afghans – and the “newcomers”, who arrived after the collapse. Recent immigrants become dependent on Afghans who understand the complexities of Russian culture and language. The role of immigrant communities’ “old-timers” in affecting the successful adaptation of new arrivals has not been given enough attention in diaspora literature in general. Particularly in the post-Soviet context, this is a key issue that needs to be further studied to bring about a full understanding of the complexities of immigrant experiences.

For the most part, Afghans have been successful in their acclimatization to life in St. Petersburg. They have all found relatively suitable living accommodations and Afghan men are employed, although most Afghan women have not worked since their arrival in the city. They use all of the resources available to them in order to facilitate the acclimatization process, including the services of the St. Petersburg Red Cross, the Afghan Cultural Centre, and the St. Petersburg Centre for Refugees. Part of the daily routines of these men and women involves frequenting the gender-specific spaces provided by these organizations for Afghans. There they may socialize with their co-nationals in a comfortable space which they have adopted as their own.

Afghans have negotiated the adaptation process in a manner that has also been fairly successful, even though all acknowledge that there is much room for improvement. Religious adaptation has been a challenge for Afghans in this non-Muslim city. This highlights the final theme of this research which is the generational divide between Afghan men and women and their children. While most of my informants were not extremely religious in Afghanistan, they all admit to a decrease in religiosity in the diaspora. However, they are adamant that they wish to raise their children to be good Afghan Muslims with an understanding of and respect for Islam. As they become more *laissez faire* about their own practice of religion, their children's level of religiosity is of increasing concern to them. They worry about their children's "Russification" yet they willingly incorporate Russian cultural elements into their Islamic holiday celebrations. Ironically, the stronger their desire to keep Islam among Afghan youth, the more that youth is becoming "Russified". The "Russification" of Afghan youth is not, necessarily as problematic as their parents make it out to be. To the contrary, it can be understood as evidence of the compatibility of Islamic and Russian cultures, and links how the younger generation weaves together the culture of their parents with that of their peers and classmates. Further, Afghan children have cultivated relationships with their Russian peers, and these Afghan youth call St. Petersburg their home. I would argue that the stage is set for the successful integration of the next generation of Afghans into Russian society.

While I have attempted to fill certain gaps in diasporic literature, I recognize that my study raises as many questions as it answers. Certain areas deserve more research. Significantly, interactions between "older" immigrants and more recent immigrants

proved to be a key point of tension for St. Petersburg's Afghans. Yet none of the research I came across on diaspora communities engages this issue more than superficially. The everyday life practice of recent immigrants as they acclimatize to their new surroundings also deserves more research. While recent literature recognizes the significance of examining the everyday practice of various cultures, I have yet to find a study which focuses on this in the diaspora context. My project has demonstrated the importance of everyday events such as shopping, consulting doctors, and using public transportation, in the lives of Afghan immigrants; they are, undoubtedly, as important to other recent immigrants.

Interactions among and between recent diaspora communities, other minorities, and the majority can be analyzed on many different levels to reveal the complexities of power dynamics, and generational, gender, and class fault lines. This study only examines a fraction of the diaspora experience of St. Petersburg's Afghans. It has, nevertheless, managed to highlight some key aspects in the process of adaptation and integration of Islamic minority communities, which were of particular significance to members of this Afghan diaspora, as well as raise questions for future research on the diaspora experience.

APPENDIX 1

List of Interviews:

1. Iskandar: May 18th, 2004
2. Frishta: May 30th, 2004
3. Ariza: June 6th, 2004
4. Momena: June 10th, 2004
5. Neba: June 16th, 2004
June 19th, 2004
6. Adela: June 23rd, 2004
7. Lida: June 24th, 2004
8. Katar: June 26th, 2004
9. Oman: June 29th, 2004
10. Nevid: June 30th, 2004
11. Fardin: July 1st, 2004
July 6th, 2004
12. Hala: July 1st, 2004
13. Saima: July 4th, 2004
14. Mustafa: July 7th, 2004
15. Dariush: July 11th, 2004
16. Faribo: July 17th, 2004
17. Akbar: July 21st, 2004
18. Arifat: January 11th, 2005
19. Samira: January 25th, 2005

APPENDIX 2

Interview Questions

- 1) What part of Afghanistan are you from? When/how/why did you come to St. Petersburg?
- 2) Who did you come here with? Did you already have family/friends living in St. Petersburg before you arrived?
- 3) When you first arrived here where did you live?
 - a. For respondents who lived with family/friends:
 - Have you since moved into your own place of residence?
 - If so, how did you find this place of residence?
 - Why/how did you choose that particular neighborhood?
 - Did you know others (family/friends) already living in your building/neighborhood?
 - b. For respondents who lived in a dormitory or who got their own residence from the start:
 - How did you find this residence upon your arrival?
 - Have you remained in this residence? Why or why not?
- 4) What is your first language? What languages did you speak/read/write upon your arrival here?
 - a. For respondents who did not know Russian:
 - How did you learn Russian?
 - Who taught you to read Russian?
 - b. For respondents with children:
 - Do your children speak/read/write Russian? If so, how did they learn? If not, why not?
 - Where do your children go to school?
 - Tell me about your childrens' friends from school.
 - How would you characterize your relationship with the parents of your children's schoolmates? What about your children's teachers?
- 5) Who/what has helped you the most in your adaptation to life in St. Petersburg?
- 6) If you had no previous contacts in St. Petersburg how did you (and your spouse, if applicable) meet people?
- 7) (Besides your spouse and children) who do you spend most of your free time with?
- 8) When not at home, where do you spend most of your time?

- 9) In what places have you felt most comfortable?
- 10) Do you frequent any cultural, religious or community centres in St. Petersburg?
- 11) Do you consider yourself to be a particularly religious Muslim? Is your spouse religious? Has your religious practice changed in St. Petersburg? If so, how?
- 12) What have been the main problems you have encountered in adapting to life here?
 - a. If respondents talk about financial or employment problems:
 - How do you earn money?
 - Have you/your spouse encountered any obstacles in finding work? If so, describe these obstacles.
 - b. If respondents talk about Russian discrimination towards them:
 - How and where have you experienced discrimination? Have your children experienced discrimination? If so, how?
 - In your opinion, is discrimination getting worse?
 - How does this discrimination affect your perceptions of life in St. Petersburg?
 - How do you feel when you meet Russians for the first time? What do you expect their reaction to be?
 - What are the places that you feel most uncomfortable going to?
 - Have you more often experienced discrimination when you have been by yourself or with other family members or friends who are Muslim?
- 13) Have you any experience with the propiska system? If so, can you tell me about it?
- 14) How would you describe your life in St. Petersburg, generally?
- 15) How has your life in St. Petersburg changed since the start of some of the political unrest in Russia? (If respondent arrived before the mid-1990's)
- 16) How would you describe your relationship with other Muslims in St. Petersburg who are not from Afghanistan?
- 17) How long do you hope live in St. Petersburg?
- 18) Do you consider St. Petersburg your home? Do you feel at home in the city?

Map of St. Petersburg Metro System

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