Caroline Bilsky, College of Wooster

Unraveling the Babushka: An Exploration of Successful Aging in the Soviet Union

Many countries in Eastern Europe, especially Russia, are experiencing a “rapid increase in the proportion of older people”\(^1\) due to increased life expectancies and low birth rates.\(^2\) Demographers consider countries where the percentage of retirement-aged people exceeds 8–10% to have an “aged population.”\(^3\) In 2005, Russia’s population of people sixty-five years of age and above was 17.1%,\(^4\) prompting President Putin to identify the situation as a “demographic crisis” (demograficheskii kryzis) and as “one of the most important problems facing Russian society.”\(^5\)

When examined within the historical context, it could reasonably be argued that this “demographic crisis” is a direct consequence of past events. Famines that occurred both before and after World War II, as well as during the war itself, resulted in exceptionally small birth cohorts from 1933 to 1945.\(^6\) These small cohorts gave birth to even smaller cohorts during the 1960s. The birth rate decreased again during the 1990s, as Russia experienced a restructuring of its entire social framework as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.\(^7\) The small cohorts, combined with death tolls during World War II, also resulted in a shortage of men. The demographic discrepancy between men and women was further enlarged by a mortality crisis in the 1990s created by alcohol consumption and cigarette use.\(^8\) The current life expectancy of a female in Russia is seventy-six years, while a Russian male’s life expectancy is sixty-four years.

---

\(^1\) Gavrilova and Gavrilov, 1.
\(^2\) Andreev; Khalturina.
\(^3\) Kinsella.
\(^4\) Gavrilova and Gavrilov, 2.
\(^5\) Parsons, 2.
\(^6\) Vassin.
\(^7\) Gavrilova and Gavrilov, 7.
\(^8\) Ibid., 9.
This twelve-year gap makes Russia’s life expectancy gender gap the largest in the world. The increase in life expectancies and decrease in birthrates is a global phenomenon as a result of which Jay Sokolovsky maintains that “a whole new matrix of generational relations and late-life possibilities” has emerged and is apparent in a variety of contemporary cultural contexts. However, some aspects of Russia’s demographic situation are unique and deserve further investigation.

To better understand cultural norms, values, and assumptions regarding the apparent increase in elderly populations worldwide, anthropologists have turned to the cross-cultural study of aging. As a result, a new subfield of anthropology has emerged known as ethnogerontology or the “anthropology of aging.” Its main purpose is the study and exploration of “aging within and across the diversity of human cultures.” Anthropologists working in this sub-discipline use “successful aging,” a concept borrowed from the health field, to explore aging within a society. “Successful aging” is a theory that relies on “different components of the biological, social, psychological, and cultural features of aging” to understand how to age “well” in a given society. In essence, it is the idea that a person’s specific behaviors, activities, and values can allow him or her to have a more positive aging experience in a particular cultural context.

Even though the large population of elderly women in Russia is considered to be an “institution” in Russian society and the image of the Russian grandmother, or babushka, is familiar to many people far removed from Slavic culture, only a small percentage of the recent explosion of anthropological research in ethnogerontology has been dedicated to Slavic

---

9 Ibid., 9.
10 Sokolovsky, xvi.
11 Association for Anthropology and Gerontology (AAGE).
12 Collings, 127.
cultures. Furthermore, very little of this scholarship focuses specifically on gender and aging, and even less analyzes the roles of women in private spaces or everyday life situations. By examining elderly female characters in seven Soviet short stories, this article attempts to bridge some of the gaps in academic literature between the specifics of Slavic culture and the concepts of aging, gender, and women’s role in the private sphere. Essentially, this article explores whether or not the Soviet population of grandmothers experienced what might be called “successful aging.”

The practice of combining anthropology and literary analysis, as discussed by James Spradley and George McDonough in *Anthropology through Literature: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, is quickly gaining popularity. This method allows researchers to analyze culture through the perspective of those writing during a particular historical moment, rather than through formal interviews or surveys done in retrospect. Some scholars have pointed out that “the simple binary is eroding” between literature and anthropology as academic disciplines move away from seeing “truth” as separate from fictional prose. It is now commonly argued that “truth” created by the author can be as legitimate as the “truth” depicted in an ethnographic account of a culture. In this study, analysis of literary conventions is used to fill the silences that have been left behind in more traditional academic discourse by blending literature with anthropological and ethnographic methods of inquiry.

The stories used in the present study were selected, in part, due to the broad spectrum of views on the aging process that they represent. They were also all written during a period of Russian history spanning the years 1974 to 1995, and encompassing the time preceding and including the period of *glasnost*, or openness. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, this

---

13 Fogiel-Bijaoui, 725.
14 Byler and Iverson.
era was marked by an increase in the transparency of governmental institutions and a loosening of censorship. These changes allowed for the publication, without fear of repercussions from the Communist Party, of depictions of Soviet life that were contrary to state-sponsored portrayals. In other words, the relaxation of Soviet government control allowed writers to depict life as they saw it, rather than as the state dictated. This era saw a shift away from the Party-sponsored style of ‘socialist realism,’ used to further communist goals by glorifying the working class, toward prose that focused on the grim struggles of daily life. As a result, many stories from this period are somber, even bleak, in tone. Moreover, this shift permitted the legal publication of an “unusual number of volumes” of collected stories by female authors that focused on the contemporary woman’s search for her place in society.  

In addition to glasnost’, literary scholar Nicholas Žekulin also proposes two additional explanations for what he considers to be a “curious phenomenon” in Russian literary history. He sees the appearance of this high volume of women’s literature as a response to a collection of samizdat (self-published) essays compiled by a group of women in Leningrad under the title Women and Russia: An Almanac for Women about Women (Zhenschchina i Rossiia: al’manakh zhenschinam o zhenschchinakh). Several contributors to the collection were exiled for criticizing the struggles faced by women during the Soviet Union. Not only did these essays pressure authorities to acknowledge some of the issues faced by women, but also led to the emergence of a feminist movement in the Soviet Union influential enough to even be mentioned in the official press.

---

15 Žekulin, 33.
16 Ibid., 33.
17 Samizdat refers to the literature printed and distributed by hand so as to avoid censorship.
Furthermore, Žekulin points out that there was another, very important reason why the Soviet government approved the publication of works by female writers describing women’s struggles in Soviet society. He explains that there was definite overlap between the themes raised by the female writers and the contemporary concerns of the Communist Party. For example, many of these fictional works examined at length the impact of drunken husbands on domestic life. In the 1980s, alcoholism was also a concern of the Communist Party because it was believed to have the potential to cause major disruption to the Soviet economy. Many short story collections were therefore published most likely because they were perceived as in line with the goals of the state.

The stories that fill the collections that Žekulin describes were written in a style known as *literatura byta*, or the “literature of daily reality.” The genre is thought to have been influenced by Natalya Baranskaya’s 1969 work, “A Week Like Any Other” (*Nedelia kak nedelia*). This story focuses on domestic chores, presenting the “graphic discrepancy in the number of hours worked by men and women as a simple factor of the domestic burden borne by women.” Although this particular story was written in 1969, it was not published until the early 1980s as part of Baranskaya’s first collection of stories, *The Woman with an Umbrella (Zhenshchina s zontikom)*. Works that fall under the genre of *literatura byta* are commonly written in the form of short stories. These stories tend to focus on the individual and shy away from making any grand conclusions about the whole of Soviet society. Usually, the narrative is written in the first-person from the perspective of the female protagonist. The genre is characterized by its focus on the subject and her domestic or everyday life activities rather than a particular style of prose.

---

18 Ibid., 36.
19 Ibid., 37.
20 Cornwell.
stories typically depict daily struggles associated with food, household matters, time spent on crowded public transportation, child-rearing, drunken husbands, loneliness, and the need for companionship. Underlying these rather grim depictions of women’s daily life, however, is a fundamental assumption that each woman is “entitled to a degree of personal happiness.” While this assumption seems to have remained constant throughout the 1980s, the methods of achieving the goal of happiness underwent radical changes. The texts demonstrate a change in women’s attitude from blaming their unhappiness on the absence of worthy men to viewing stability and happiness as an object of personal achievement. This change implies that authors began to question the ideals that had previously been considered the ultimate goals of happiness, such as personal fulfillment through marriage.

Due to the noticeable changes that occurred in Russian literature between the 1970s and 1990s, short stories specifically from this period provide an excellent foundation for an examination of the female experience in late-Soviet Russia. Not only were many texts produced during this time, but their focus on the mundane activities of individual women are able to shed light on how the aging process affected women’s self-perception. For the purposes of this study, short stories written by both male and female authors were chosen in order to provide a more balanced representation of the aging process. The authors use a variety of literary techniques, ranging from the Russian chernukha (black realism) to “magical” realism as discussed below. The seven stories used are also told from various perspectives: two are partially narrated by the children of the elderly characters, three have omniscient narrators, and three are told from the point of view of the aging protagonist. Ultimately, these particular stories were chosen because they provide diverse representations of the female experience. The characters described live in

21 Žekulin, 43.
22 Ibid., 73.
both rural and urban locations in the Soviet Union. Each woman is in a different stage of aging with a unique career and family structure. Nevertheless, each author’s emphasis on the theme of aging and its effects on family relations, sexuality, and employment, suggests that despite variations in depictions of old age, there were certain experiences that all aging women shared in Russia.

**Natalya Baranskaya’s “The Kiss”**

In “The Kiss” (1981), Baranskaya takes the reader through Nadezhda Mikhailovna’s day following a passionate kiss in an elevator with a younger man named Viktor. The story is narrated by Nadezhda as she prepares for a date with Viktor. As she goes grocery shopping, sets the table, and gets dressed, the reader observes her transformation from a happy woman who is confident in her appearance, to a ‘granny,’ second-guessing herself at every turn. Matters are made worse when she receives a phone call from her daughter, asking if Nadezhda would babysit her grandson, Seriozha. Nadezhda initially refuses, but then feels guilty, and eventually chooses her familial duty over her date.

At its heart, “The Kiss” tells the story of Nadezhda navigating the liminal boundary between the desires and obligations of a woman and grandmother, and the conflict that occurs when these two roles collide. The kiss she shares with Viktor serves as a catalyst that forces her to begin the transition process. By choosing her familial role over her role as a potential lover, Nadezhda completes the process of transition and accepts her position as a grandmother.

Prior to the kiss, Nadezhda is described as a good-looking linguist in her forties, though no one “ever took her for over thirty-five.”23 She describes herself positively as “elegant,”

---

23 Baranskaya, 1.
“lively,” and with a “shapely back.”24 Recalling a party that she attended, she admits that she “knew she looked especially attractive.”25 The kiss reawakens sexual feelings in Nadezhda, stirring her interest in continuing the relationship while also making her anxious. It is apparent that she is initially open to a sexual relationship with Viktor. Her “heart stops” and then “instantly begins to pound” at his touch.26 When she does not hear from Viktor soon after “the incident,” Nadezhda is upset and feels “dropped, abandoned, cast off … dumped.”27 When Viktor finally calls to invite her to join him on a date, she is “pleased,” begins to “walk with pleasure,” and makes an effort to present herself in the best way possible by cleaning the apartment, “applying a yeast facial mask,” and “going to bed earlier than usual.”28 Nadezhda is so delighted by the prospect of the relationship that, as she prepares for the date, she hums the song that Viktor played for her on the night of their kiss. These physical and emotional signs demonstrate Nadezhda’s excitement at the possibility of a relationship with Viktor and that she still feels like a sexual being.

Despite her obvious excitement, Nadezhda is also very nervous about entering a new relationship. This combination of unease and excitement indicates that Nadezhda has entered a liminal space.29 She begins to doubt her attractiveness describing herself as a “tired … plain woman in her 40s” with wrinkles that are becoming increasingly prominent.30 She stifles herself from singing the song Viktor played for her with self-mockery and calls the kiss a “banal adventure”31 that should “quickly be forgotten.”32 Nadezhda becomes worried about the fact that

24 Ibid., 1.
25 Ibid., 1.
26 Ibid., 2.
27 Ibid., 1.
28 Ibid., 4.
29 “Liminal” is an anthropological term describing a transitional or in between state.
30 Baranskaya, 3.
31 Ibid., 2.
she does not know Viktor well and panics as she realizes that she may feel satisfied with him today, “but what about tomorrow? What if, after spending the night with her, he suddenly says that he intends to move in? Or the other way round: he’ll disappear one morning and never come back.”

Nadezhda’s self-doubt and the type of questions that she poses to herself reveal that her uncertainty about entering into a new sexual relationship stems from her fear of the risk that such a relationship may pose to the stability of her family life. Viktor represents a potential threat that brings her roles both as lover and grandmother into direct conflict. Although Nadezhda’s daughter Natasha is married and has a child, Nadezhda still feels responsible for providing for her family, as evidenced by her reaction to her daughter’s request for help. Even when grocery shopping for her date, Nadezhda considers the well-being of her daughter and grandchild and buys them apples and grapes. Baranskaya creates an interesting juxtaposition to illustrate the conflict Nadezhda experiences between providing for her family and providing for a possible lover. Nadezhda is placed in the role of provider when she plans to cook dinner at her house on the date with Viktor. The fact that Natasha calls to ask for her mother’s help while Nadezhda is preparing to provide for Viktor, places Nadezhda in a situation where she must choose one relationship over the other. This incident demonstrates that Nadezhda does not believe that she can fulfill both the roles of lover and grandmother and, thus, must choose to fulfill one or the other. She inevitably determines that the risk Viktor poses to her family is too high. By cancelling her date in order to babysit her grandchild, Nadezhda elects to complete the transition

32 Ibid., 3.
33 Ibid., 5.
to grandmother, which requires her to provide only for her family and to close her “personal account in the love department.”

Ludmila Petrushevskaya’s “Waterloo Bridge”

In Petrushevskaya’s “Waterloo Bridge” (1995), the heroine, Granny Olya, has been abandoned by her husband and lives a lonely life working as an insurance agent and providing for her adult daughter and grandchild. Her daughter forces Granny Olya to sleep on a couch in the hallway while she and her child sleep in the apartment’s bedroom. One afternoon, Granny Olya decides to treat herself to a movie called *Waterloo Bridge*. As she watches, she realizes that the film depicts all of her dreams and the life that she has always wished for but has not lived. Although the heroine of the film lives in poverty and dies young, her life is nevertheless presented as full of love and “candlelight waltzes.” That night, Granny Olya dreams of the male lead, Robert Taylor. The next day she searches for another theater that is screening the film. When she arrives, she is surprised to see that the theater is full of the very same old women who had been at the theater the day before. Granny Olya and “the hordes of little ladies and grannies” continue to flock to theaters around Moscow to see the same film day after day. The film provides an escape for a few hours from the reality of their daily lives. Following the movie, Granny Olya returns to her grim life as an insurance agent. As the days pass, her worlds—one real and one imagined based on the film—begin to overlap. One night, following a showing of the film, Granny Olya bumps into a sick and neglected man while she is on her way home from the theater. She quickly brushes past him and hurries home. However, that night, after reflecting on the meeting, Granny Olya concludes that the man is Robert Taylor and that he has been

---

34 Ibid., 2.
35 Petrushevskaya, 167.
36 Ibid., 171.
wandering around the theater in hopes of seeing her. She reasons that it must be Robert Taylor who appeared to her because she has been forgotten by the rest of the world. The story ends by hinting that Granny Olya will soon die and describes her as a forgotten soul who is “literally in the last days of life.”

In contrast with Nadezhda’s experience transitioning into the role of grandmother in “The Kiss,” “Waterloo Bridge” depicts an elderly woman who has already undergone the transition from woman to elderly woman so completely that everyone “on public transport and on the street” calls her “granny.” Unlike Nadezhda who helps her daughter occasionally, Granny Olya is a long-term provider for her daughter, “usually absent” son-in-law, and grandchild. In fact, Granny Olya has been the sole provider for her family ever since her husband left on a business trip and never returned, leaving her “without anything, no work experience, no prospects for a pension, and not a kopeck to her name,” and requiring her to learn a new professional trade as an insurance agent. Tension in the family damages the relationship of love and respect between mother and daughter. As a result, Granny Olya becomes more like a servant to her daughter. Petrushevskaya writes that Granny Olya elicited the complete trust and friendly disposition of strangers but “not her own daughter, who didn’t give a damn about her mother and felt her papa’s departure was fully justified.” The conflict with her daughter prevents Granny Olya from feeling fulfilled in her role as provider and leads her to pursue another source of stability and happiness. Her sexual fantasies about a fictional film character thus fulfill her desire for a meaningful relationship.

---

37 Ibid., 174.
38 Ibid., 163.
39 Ibid., 164.
40 Ibid., 165.
41 Ibid., 164.
As opposed to Nadezhda in “The Kiss,” who achieves familial stability and does everything in her power to avoid threatening that stability, the strained relationship between mother and daughter in “Waterloo Bridge” undermines the stability in Granny Olya’s family life. Granny Olya does not face the same risks as Nadezhda and is thus able to search for respect and love elsewhere, which she finds through her infatuation with Robert Taylor. She begins to attend every screening of the film in Moscow in order to “rendezvous with her beloved.” Granny Olya’s love for Robert Taylor grows so intense that she “[drifts] into a dream” when thinking about him. The author writes that “[once] she even went for a drive with him in an open car, both of them sitting in the backseat . . . [and] he half-embraced Granny Olya’s shoulders.” Granny Olya even begins writing short poems and singing to her customers “with all her might” about her feelings.

Literary scholar Alexandra Smith provides an alternative analysis of Petrushevskaya’s presentation of Granny Olya’s relationship with Robert Taylor. She suggests that, based on the attention she pays to describing Robert Taylor’s mustache, Granny Olya subconsciously associates Taylor with Stalin. Smith argues that, “by creating a fan club of old ladies who admire the film, [Baba] Olja satisfies her need to reinstate the behavior model based on the cult of personality.” Although Smith’s discussion of “Waterloo Bridge” forms only a small part of her larger study of postmodernist thought in Russian literature, her assessment of this story lends an interesting point to this discussion. It illustrates that, in addition to desiring a romantic relationship, Granny Olya and other elderly women also desired the stability that they believed

42 Ibid., 169.
43 Ibid., 172.
44 Ibid., 172.
46 Smith, 6.
47 Ibid., 6. In her work, Smith uses a different transliteration of the name “Olya.”
Stalin had provided. During Stalin’s regime, the Communist Party was perceived as a “big family” and Stalin was often viewed as a father figure. This connection to Stalin suggests that Granny Olya is pursuing not only a sexual relationship, but a familial one as well because she desires a stable kin unit. The fact that the theater is full of other elderly women displaying the same behaviors demonstrates that this phenomenon is not unique to Granny Olya. She is not the only woman who lacks fulfillment in her role as a provider, and she is not unique in her desire to seek new romantic relations to supplement that role.

**Tatyana Tolstaya’s “Sweet Shura”**

“Sweet Shura” (1987) chronicles memories from the life of Alexandra Ernestovna, an eighty-four-year-old woman living in Moscow. The narrator describes watching Alexandra sit on a bench in a dirty black skirt as someone else’s child dumps “sandy treasures” into her lap.\(^4\) Despite having had three husbands and a series of lovers, Alexandra has no children or grandchildren. As the story progresses, the perspectives of Alexandra and the narrator begin to morph into one. The changing perspectives and increasingly outlandish memories give the reader the impression that Shura, as she is called for short, is losing her mind. She recalls Ivan Nikolaevich, her lover in the Crimea, and the life she could have had with him on the beach. It becomes impossible to know whether or not Ivan Nikolaevich ever existed. The story ends with Shura’s death, and her ghost dissolving like a mirage as she travels south toward the Crimea wearing a crown of wooden fruit and cardboard flowers.

The snapshots that make up the story of “Sweet Shura” represent an old woman’s desire to fulfill her loneliness with recollections of past love. The sentiment Tolstaya employs most frequently to describe Alexandra is lonely (*odinokaia*). She is said to be “alone in the world,” or

\(^4\) Tolstaya, 179.
“all alone” because she has “outlived everyone.” Yet, despite being alone, the only stories she tells are about the men who used to be a part of her life. She reminds the reader that she had “three husbands, by the way,” so frequently that this statement often appears several times per page. Alexandra describes her first husband as “a lawyer, a famous one,” with whom she enjoyed trips to Finland and with whom she ate oysters while wearing “hats with lace.” After his death, she married a well-known physician who filled her home with “famous guests” and “flowers.”

Alexandra’s retellings act as distractions from her lonely reality and as proof that she was once a lively young woman whose future was not always so decidedly lonesome. They serve as reminders to Alexandra and the reader that, although she is now an eighty-four-year-old widow who wears “a horrid piece of underwear that hangs down from under her soiled black skirt,” once she had “so many admirers” and her life was not always this bleak. This constant desire to reassure the strangers that she meets about her various past relationships can be read as Alexandra’s attempt to justify her loneliness to herself and those around her. By explaining that she had several husbands and lovers, and therefore several chances to start a family, but that, for reasons beyond her control, the relationships were never successful, she provides justification for why her current situation is not her fault. Her actions suggest to the reader that her lack of a family or partner is in fact the fundamental cause of her somber attitude in old age.

The relationship that Alexandra recollects most frequently is her affair with Ivan Nikolaevich in Crimea. She seems to believe that Ivan has been waiting for her to join him in

49 Ibid., 177.
50 Ibid., 177, 178, 180.
51 Ibid., 177.
52 Ibid., 178.
53 Ibid., 178.
54 Ibid., 176.
55 Ibid., 178.
Crimea since 1913. When her husband “had his own things to do [and] was rarely home,” often leaving Shura alone, Ivan would send letters to her pleading, “My Dear Shura, come to me, come to me!”\textsuperscript{56} and promising, “My Dear Shura, it will be forever.”\textsuperscript{57} These letters temporarily fulfilled her loneliness, caused in part by her husband’s lack of attention. The story ends with Alexandra arguing with herself about whether or not she should board the train to Crimea. She has purchased a ticket, though we do not know when, and she feels guilty for making Ivan wait for her at the train platform for so long. Alexandra dies before she can make a final decision. In the final scene, her ghost travels south toward Crimea and Ivan.

Alexandra’s passionate fantasy, which she may have nurtured for as long as seventy years, is similar in nature to Granny Olya’s imagined relationship with Robert Taylor. Both characters share a need to substitute a relationship, even an illusory one, for their failed attempts to maintain strong familial bonds. Although Granny Olya has a daughter and grandchild, their relationship is troublesome and, therefore, her fate is similar to Alexandra’s. Like the ideal of Robert Taylor, Ivan represents a romantic relationship, family, stability, and the idea of “forever” for Alexandra as she reminisces about the past in the final days of her life.\textsuperscript{58}

**Nina Katerli’s “The Farewell Light”**

Katerli’s “The Farewell Light” (1981) is told from the perspective of Andrei Martynov, a forty-three-year-old son and stepfather who is mourning the recent death of his mother. Following her death, Martynov begins to see his mother’s ghost walking around the streets of Moscow and decides to go to her apartment, which he has avoided since her death. When he arrives, he realizes that Tatiana, his teenage stepdaughter with whom he has a very strained

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 179.
relationship, has been visiting the apartment since his mother’s death and taking her belongings. At first he is upset by this realization because he believes Tatiana is stealing his mother’s things. His outlook changes, however, when he finds his mother’s diary and learns that she was not simply an old woman who struggled to carry her groceries to her apartment, but had lived a much fuller life than he had previously assumed. At Tatiana’s request, Andrei’s mother had hidden the fact that her step-granddaughter visited her every day to discuss life matters and to accompany her on walks around the city. Andrei thus sees that his mother’s life was much more complex than he had thought. This realization helps him come to terms with his mother’s death while calming his anxiety about his own aging.

“The Farewell Light” depicts the last several months of an elderly woman’s life and the changes that took place during these months as a result of a new-found relationship with her step-granddaughter. As this relationship grows, a fundamental shift in the grandmother’s mentality occurs that is manifest in the evolution of her journal entries. While the earlier entries focus on her declining health and the struggles of her daily life, later entries reveal an increasing focus on nature, future plans, and finding solutions to her family’s struggles. The first several entries are systematic. Each entry describes her day, noting what time the compote came to a boil and when she took her medication. Andrei observes that “notes of this kind filled five pages. Medicine. Pension. Social Security. Medicine again.” The title of the journal alludes to his mother’s decline: “Diary of a Sclerotic,” meaning the diary of one who is becoming stiff or rigid. This name and her attention to medication suggest that she was aware of the fact that her health was deteriorating and thought almost exclusively only about her day-to-day activities.

59 Katerli, 150.
60 Ibid., 153.
As Andrei continues reading, he is surprised to learn that his stepdaughter was secretly visiting his mother. Andrei married Tatiana’s mother when she was seventeen. Tatiana thus struggled to find her place into her new family. The journal reveals that Tatiana consulted her step-grandmother for advice because she felt alienated and misunderstood by her parents. Her grandmother accepted the challenge of being her confidante. The journal demonstrates her feelings: “I’ve got a fine granddaughter. The more I get to know her, the more I like her.” Her new position as her step-granddaughter’s confidante gave Andrei’s mother a sense of renewed belonging to a family. As a result, the subject matter of her journal entries also changed. As Tatiana begins visiting regularly, her step-grandmother begins using the journal to ponder answers to Tatiana’s questions: “What should I tell her? How do I explain that it’s often as difficult for parents to understand children as it is for children to understand their parents?” She begins to make future plans to travel with Tatiana to a resort in Kliazma over winter break, promising to “get the vouchers for the trip early.” These entries reveal that the new familial role she is playing as grandmother to Tatiana serves as a distraction from her failing health, thus making her experiences in old age more vivacious and fulfilling. The shift in her attitude is further demonstrated by her confidence in her son’s happiness: “how good it is that he’s settled down… [and] that he has his own family now. Now it won’t be so awful for me to die.” Andrei’s mother’s relationship with her step-granddaughter changes her outlook on life. It overshadows her declining physical health and other problems of age. She no longer feels anxious about aging because she has been included in the family and given insight into her son’s relationship with his daughter.

61 Ibid., 150.
62 Ibid., 161.
63 Ibid., 158.
64 Ibid., 159.
65 Ibid., 156.
After reading these journal entries and realizing the bond that his stepdaughter had with his mother, Andrei’s own attitude toward aging also changes. Immediately following the death of his mother, when he sees her ghost, he describes her as “bent over almost in half” and explains that ghost of “the old woman with a cane resembled a hairpin.”66 The sightings of his mother and his recognition of the fact that “now, with her gone, he [is] the oldest in the family,” cause Andrei to become an anxious hypochondriac who has “to take Validol whenever he [leaves] the house.”67 His anxiety stems in part from his overwhelming fear of becoming useless, or worse, “a person reluctant to resign himself to his own uselessness.”68 He worries that his life of traveling and working as the director of the largest and most important laboratory at the institute will deteriorate to a life of “television, like Mother had. Dancing on ice and ‘Animal Kingdom.’”69 As Andrei realizes that his mother was not “useless” in her old age, his fears and anxiety begin to subside. His descriptions of his mother’s ghost echo his change of attitude. His final apparition is very different from his initial sightings. At the end of the story, he describes her ghost as “holding her bare head high and swinging the red purse that she was clutching in her right hand in rhythm with her step, like an adolescent girl.”70

This extreme fear of becoming a “useless” member of society parallels a phenomenon that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s in the Soviet Union. As Michelle A. Parsons explains in Dying Unneeded: The Cultural Context of the Russian Mortality Crisis, social status in the Soviet Union was directly linked to having something to offer others, whether it be “something in short supply, a favor, a contact,” or the ability to serve the state.71 Serving the state could

---

66 Ibid., 143.
67 Ibid., 146.
68 Ibid., 147.
69 Ibid., 147.
70 Ibid., 163.
71 Parsons, 10.
mean taking care of the family at home or contributing to family by working outside the home. Parsons also notes that “need” is a gendered concept. She suggests that a woman “is always needed because she is in the family.” On the other hand, a man’s sense of being needed “[centers] on being able to adequately provide,” typically by working outside the home. Parson’s argument explains why Andrei’s mother’s attitude changes when she starts to feel needed by her step-granddaughter as well as why Andrei felt great anxiety about what he would do after retirement. However, by showing how Andrei’s anxiety dissipated when he read about positive family relations, “The Farewell Light” implies that even a man can feel needed as long as he has a strong family network.

**Friedrich Gorenstein’s “Making the Rounds with the Shopping Bag”**

“Making the Rounds with the Shopping Bag” (1982) follows Old Avdotya as she travels around Moscow moving from one grocery store to the next in search of “valuable” food items. Avdotya is a typical “grocery store old woman” who spends her days waiting in line for sausage, vegetables, or champagne in order to sell them for higher prices on the street. Avdotya’s habits evolved from her past experiences. She had lived through times of extreme food shortage following World War II when the Soviet economy was “weighted toward heavy industry, not consumer goods.” The partiality toward industrial production, in combination with the hoarding of supplies and a misinformed government, resulted in chronic shortages of goods for sale. As Tatyana Mamonova writes, stores lacked “even the most essential goods: there [was] not butter or meat or milk…[no] sausage or cheese or fish.” Although storefronts and windows

---

72 Ibid., 11.
73 Ibid., 11.
74 Gorenstein, 19.
75 Parsons, 15.
76 Verdery.
77 Mamonova, 29.
appeared to be filled with products for sale, women, who Mamonova describes as the primary food providers, were often forced to wait in long lines and would sometimes even fight over the minimal items available. These shortages, however, also allowed for the development of “informal economies of barter between firms and exchange between individuals.” Securing goods thus had “little to do with money and everything to do with personal relationships and connections.”

Avdotya is one of the women who understands the Soviet social network of exchange and has adjusted her routine to profit from it: she knows which stores to go to for specific items, which customers to be wary of, and who can be tricked into helping her obtain what she desires. The risks associated with this task become apparent as she mentions other old women who are in the hospital with fractures resulting from a “battle” for a Polish ham. After a particularly successful day of shopping, Avdotya enters her final store carrying a shopping bag full of “trophies” and sees smoked sausage lying on the counter. She is outraged when someone tries to cut in front of her in line and, after attempting to push past him, ultimately regains consciousness in a hospital. Avdotya’s only concern is that her shopping bag did not arrive at the hospital with her and that an entire day’s work has been lost. Days later she receives a package from the clerk at the store where the accident occurred. Many of her prized items are missing, but Avdotya is delighted to be reunited with her bag and the remaining kilo of apples, package of gingerbread cookies, bottle of kefir, and three tins of herring.

The story of Avdotya demonstrates an elderly woman’s attempts to replace a non-existent kin network with a job. Avdotya has no friends or family because no one visits her in the

---

78 Ibid., 29.
79 Parsons, 15.
80 Ibid., 15.
hospital. When she receives the package containing her missing shopping bag she is understandably curious as to who could have sent it because “she [has] no kith or kin.” On the one hand, Avdotya’s experiences are different from those of Nadezhda, Olya, Shura, and the other characters discussed because her actions are not a direct consequence of familial relationships. On the other hand, however, like the other women, she also attempts to find a substitute for her disappointing family life. The shopping bag Avdotya carries is crucial to her ability to perform her job as a professional shopper and maintain financial stability. She therefore cares for it as if it were kin. Additionally, because Avdotya’s success depends on her deep understanding of the network of shopkeepers and shoppers, this community provides her with a group of “fictive kin.” There are many similarities between the ways that the other elderly women discussed provide for their family members and the way that Avdotya treats her shopping bag. The first thought she has when waking up in the morning is of her bag. When the handle breaks, she “laments” and tries to “mend it before the stores open.” At night Avdotya dreams of her bag and, because she considers it to be irreplaceable, she “grieves” when she thinks she has lost it. When the shopping bag is returned to her, Avdotya is struck with disbelief because it is like a “dream.” She even admits that “the shopping bag [is] like a blood relative to her.” By expressing how essential the shopping bag is to her life and comparing the bag to a blood relative, Avdotya affirms the importance of blood relatives to the aging process in Russia.

Each of the stories analyzed thus far assert the importance of the role of blood relatives to the aging female population in Russia by depicting the substitution of fictive kin in the absence

---

81 Gorenstein, 61.
82 In anthropology, “fictive kin” refers to any kind of relationship that is outside of blood or law, such as godparents or sorority sisters.
83 Ibid., 19.
84 Ibid., 61.
85 Ibid., 62.
86 Ibid., 61.
of familial bonds. In “The Kiss,” Nadezhda chooses not to replace her family with romance, Granny Olya and Alexandra compensate for their lack of family with imagined relationships, and Andrei’s mother substitutes a bond with a step-relative in place of a blood relative. Avdotya is unable to form meaningful relationships with people, real or imagined, and instead fulfills this need with an inanimate object, her shopping bag.

**Vasily Belov’s “That Kind of War”**

In “That Kind of War” (1989), Belov describes the life of an elderly widow, Darya Rumyantseva, whose son was killed in World War II. Left alone to run the household and work in the stables, Darya is unable to earn enough money to support herself. As a peasant, she is also required to pay taxes to the government. Pavel, the tax collector and childhood friend of her son Vanya, begins to visit her. In order to pay the required taxes, Darya voluntarily offers all of her possessions to Pavel until she has nothing left. Other elderly women from the village sympathize with her situation and pool their money to buy back Darya’s samovar. When the women try to deliver the samovar, they find Darya’s house empty. Everyone assumes that Darya has fled the village to live as a beggar. The next winter, however, the villagers hear that a body has been discovered in the forest near the village. The women assume that the deceased is Darya, but an old man reminds them that it could have been anyone because “old Mother Russia” is full of lonely, old women like her.\(^\text{87}\)

Belov’s story depicts the struggles of an elderly peasant woman trying to survive in rural Soviet Union after World War II. The challenges that Darya faces seem to be a direct result of the death of her son. Although the other older women in the village are aware of her situation

---

\(^{87}\) Belov, 107.
and occasionally check in on her, the fact that her disappearance goes unnoticed at first implies that fictive kin relationships cannot replace blood kin.

Darya’s decision not to accept the truth of her son’s death is indicative of the magnitude of her loss. Even though she receives an official notification, Darya refuses to believe that her son was killed. She instead gives what little money she has to the gypsies “to tell her Vanya’s fortune.” Although the villagers know the truth, “all the people, especially the womenfolk, [are] sincere in their boisterous confirmations of Darya’s thoughts.” Darya’s refusal to come to terms with Vanya’s death shows that he was not just a significant person in her life, but was also crucial to her survival and cannot be replaced. Darya is forced to work to support herself and maintain her house alone after the death of her son. This was a nearly impossible task due to the condition of the country following World War II. Rural villages were destroyed and the country was ravaged by famine. Although Darya is unable to pay her taxes, Pavel still comes to collect her “payments for insurance, the State War Loan, and the additional, voluntary tax.” Darya frequently reminisces about the close friendship shared between her son and Pavel before the war. This indicates that, if Vanya had not been killed, his relationship with Pavel could have helped to protect his mother from harassment by tax collectors.

Pavel’s frequent visits eventually strip Darya of all her possessions. She reaches out to him, calling him an “old friend,” using the diminutive of his name, “dear Pashenka,” and offering to “pray for [him] as long as [she] lives.” As a tax collector Pavel is an embodiment of the state. Although Darya reaches out to him in her time of need, he is dismissive. As mentioned in the discussion of “Waterloo Bridge,” during this time, the state was often seen as the “big

88 Ibid., 87.
89 Ibid., 86.
90 Ibid., 89.
91 Ibid., 103.
family.” By reaching out to Pavel, Darya attempts to create a place for herself within the “big family” as a substitute for her lack of blood kin. Darya hopes to fulfill her role as familial provider for this new family by willingly giving away her possessions and feeling guilty when she does not have enough to contribute. To assuage her guilt, Darya sells a goat that she considers to be a pet and pays the seventy-five rubles she receives for it “to the tax collector that very day.”

She also forces herself to give up her son’s suit in exchange for half a sack of potatoes. She then uses these potatoes for seeding, so that “she, like all good people, would be able to plant at least one small patch” and give the yields to the state. Darya’s sacrifices for the good of the “big family” demonstrate that she has replaced the role she would have played within her own blood family with a role supporting the state, or “big family.”

Despite her attempts to create a bond with Pavel, he confiscates Darya’s samovar, forcing her to leave her home and beg in the neighboring villages. Pavel’s seizure of a samovar shows that the state is rejecting Darya’s attempts to form a kin network. Other elderly women in the village endeavor to make up for the state’s abandonment of Darya by organizing a fund to return the samovar. In theory this gesture is promising, but Darya never returns to use the samovar, suggesting that she has given up on both the state and her personal kin network. The failed attempts of the other female villagers to save Darya suggest that fictive kin are unable to serve as replacements for blood kin.

The fact that the villagers are not surprised when they discover Darya’s body suggests that the peasants almost anticipated her death, especially after Vanya was killed. For this reason, it was especially important for them to let Darya believe that her son would return, and they did

---

92 Ibid., 95.
93 Ibid., 95.
this “boisterously.” 94 When the villagers learn that a body has been discovered in the forest, one peasant doubts that it is in fact Darya. He reminds everyone, “You think this can’t be anyone else than our old woman Darya, huh? Ain’t there more than a few old women like her in old Mother Ru-u-ssie? If you had to count these old women, [there] wouldn’t be numbers enough. [Those] old women, there’s so many of them…” 95 Darya’s situation is so common that the peasants can easily predict her reaction to the loss of her family and foretell her imminent death.

**Anna Mass’s “A Business Trip Home”**

Tanya, the protagonist of the story “A Business Trip Home,” (1974) is a geologist who spends most of her time in the field with her geologist husband. Her adolescent son, Seriozha, lives with her elderly parents so that she is able to maintain her career and adventurous lifestyle. At the beginning of the story, Tanya reminisces about her visits home before she had a husband and Seriozha. She would be greeted at the train platform by her excited parents and then return to a clean apartment, her favorite meals, and a warm bath prepared by her mother. Now, twelve years after the birth of her son, Tanya’s visits home are no longer met with excitement, but with relief. She knows that her aging parents are worried they will not be able to take care of her son for much longer, and they welcome her arrival because it offers them a break from this responsibility.

In the story, Tanya returns home because she has received a letter from her father explaining that her mother is ill. He does not explicitly ask that she return home, but instead expresses his worry about being too old to move the family and their belongings from their dacha back to the city for the start of the school year. Tanya thus travels home to surprise her family. The remainder of the story is Tanya’s stream-of-consciousness narration of her few days at the

---

94 Ibid., 86.
95 Ibid., 107.
dacha. Tanya realizes that she does not have a “real” relationship with her son Seriozha because he is less than enthusiastic when she arrives. She worries that when she becomes old, he will not help her, and like her parents, she will not have any adult children to help her move. She feels guilty for her long absences after seeing the joy that her presence brings to her mother. Tanya recognizes that she would need to quit working and move home in order to form a relationship with her family and lift the burden of raising a child from her elderly parents. In the final paragraph of the story, Tanya visualizes her train ride to-and-from home as a bridge. On either shore stands a woman. On one side, stands an “exhausted creature” loaded down with shopping bags, and on the other, a woman bitter and ashamed for the other, but bending under the heavy burden of the family that she left on the other side.96

“A Business Trip Home” considers the perceived role of a Russian mother as she prepares for old age. Reflecting on the importance her own mother places on their relationship, Tanya begins to understand that her way of life, apart from her child, will not lead to happiness in the future. When Tanya returns home, she is consistently met with joy from her parents. Her mother’s biggest fear is “to die without seeing [Tanya] again.”97 Tanya can feel her mother “reveling in the fact that [Tanya] [is] there”98 by “simply looking at [Tanya],” and celebrating “the mere fact of [her] presence.”99 Tanya is able to see in her mother’s face “pure openness, such pure love for [her]…that the calm thought would suddenly surface through the excitement of the meeting: this is happiness.”100 Even though her mother’s cheer during this visit is partly due to the “relief” she feels that Tanya can now help care for her son, it is clear that Tanya’s mother relishes spending time with her daughter.

96 Mass, 48.
97 Ibid., 41.
98 Ibid., 38.
99 Ibid., 42.
100 Ibid., 36.
Mass makes it clear that Tanya’s brief visits home are one of the biggest sources of joy for her mother, especially as her health declines. Tanya wonders what will happen as her body ages and she is no longer physically able to work. At the same time, Tanya begins to realize that she does not have a meaningful relationship with her son and recognizes that her old age will look drastically different from her mother’s. When Tanya first sees Seriozha, he “[is] not happy to see [Tanya]. Not at all. [Her] arrival has disturbed his game, and the rhythm of his life in general.”

When Tanya begins to criticize her son’s performance in school, he responds by shouting with tears in his voice, “That’s enough! It’s started! She’s back.” Tanya comes to terms with her childless future when she says, “In old age we are hurt by the ingratitude of our children. But what is it that they should be grateful for? What did we sacrifice for them? Did we deny ourselves anything as far as they were concerned? On the contrary, we constantly try to fix it so that our children don’t disturb us.”

Tanya understands that, when Seriozha is an adult, he will not help her in her old age because she did not provide for him as he was growing up.

“Successful Aging” in Russian Short Stories

An analysis of these seven stories of old age suggests that kinship was the single most significant factor for “successful aging” in the Soviet Union. Although other contributing factors, such as (un)employment, physical health, and feeling needed, are also examined in these stories, kinship is the most prominent and appears to have had a direct influence on all other aspects of life. The happiness of an old woman directly correlates with the strength and size of her kin network and her ability to provide either monetarily or emotionally. In “Waterloo Bridge,” Granny Olya works as an insurance agent to supplement her daughter’s income. In “The

101 Ibid., 43.
102 Ibid., 44.
103 Ibid., 48.
Farewell Light,” the blossoming relationship between Andrei’s mother and her step-granddaughter and the advice she gives her overshadow her declining physical health. Moreover, by observing the effects of intergenerational relationships on their mothers, Andrei, in “The Farewell Light,” and Tanya, in “A Business Trip Home,” are able to envision future challenges in their own lives and relationships. Andrei learns that being needed in his private life compensates for no longer being a contributing member in the public sphere, and similarly, Tanya realizes that a bond with her son will be crucial when she is no longer physically capable of working as a geologist.

Whether explicitly stated or implied, the influence of kinship on aging seems to have been extremely important and is the primary focus of each character’s life. In stories such as “The Kiss” and “Waterloo Bridge,” the identity of each character is determined by his or her place within a consanguineal kin network. In “The Kiss,” it becomes apparent that Nadezhda has internalized her role as a grandmother when she tells herself to “go to sleep, Grandma” and then chooses to cancel her date in order to babysit her grandchild. Although she still considers herself to be attractive and lively and has romantic feelings for Viktor, her role as a grandmother is more important. Likewise, Granny Olya’s role in her family is such an integral part of her personality that it is also part of her nickname: she is referred to as “Granny” by both strangers and friends. In some ways kinship is even more important to the characters without consanguineal kin ties because these women form bonds with anyone or anything, including film characters, tax collectors, and a shopping bag, in order to make up for their lack of blood relations. In “Sweet Shura,” even as her mind and body deteriorate, Alexandra’s daydreams of

---

104 In anthropology, consanguines are kin who are related by blood, affines are kin who are created by law, and, as mentioned earlier, fictive kin refer to all other kinds of bond, such as godparents or sorority sisters.
105 Baranskaya, 3.
her beloved Ivan in the Crimea provide a distraction and motivate her to continue living. In “Waterloo Bridge,” the strained relationship between Granny Olya and her daughter causes her to fall in love with and devote her time to a film character. By the end of the story she is so invested in the relationship that she mistakes a passing stranger for her beloved. In “Making the Rounds with the Shopping Bag,” Avdotya explains that she thinks of her shopping bag as a “blood relative”106 because the two are codependent: Avdotya needs the bag to carry all of her valuables and the bag needs Avdotya to mend it when it tears.

These stories also reveal that the three types of kin (consanguineal, affinal, and fictive) each have a different impact on the process of “successful aging.” “The Kiss,” for example, juxtaposes consanguineal kin and fictive kin, or Nadezhda’s family and Viktor. By choosing her family over Viktor, Nadezhda demonstrates that blood relations are more valuable than other relations. When Darya reaches out to Pasha as a representative of the state in “That Kind of War,” she does so in an attempt to form a fictive relationship, but despite her efforts she dies alone in the forest, proving that fictive kin are poor substitutes for family. Similarly, Alexandra’s long list of lovers in “Sweet Shura” is not enough to provide her with strong familial connections later in life. On the other hand, as demonstrated in “The Farewell Light,” affinal kin relationships can be meaningful. The bond between Andrei’s mother and Tanya has a very positive impact on Andrei’s mother’s aging process. Although the relationship is formed very late in life, the formation of the bond between Tanya and her step-grandmother demonstrates that affinal kin, though not related by blood, can have an impact on “successful aging” equal to that of consanguineal kin. In fact, it is even suggested that relationships with affinal kin can be more meaningful and fulfilling than those with blood relatives.

106 Gorenstein, 61.
By pairing literary analysis with methods of modern anthropology, this paper provides insight into the characteristics that were deemed essential for “successful aging” in the Soviet Union. The literary approach is especially useful in assessing theories of aging in ways that other forms of cultural study cannot. Whether the depictions are based in fact or fiction, literature allows the researcher to gather data from carefully crafted depictions of life in a specific cultural context. These illustrations differ tremendously from responses given in formal interviews or surveys, which are commonly formed after specific question have been posed. Because literary analysis is not the most commonly used medium of anthropological study, it provides important unexplored insights into cultural norms about women and aging in the Soviet Union. The present study suggests that kin relations, in all varieties, are the most significant factor related to the success of a woman in old age. Kinship dictates the role that other factors, such as employment, physical health, or sexuality, play within the life of a babushka. By depicting the lengths that elderly Soviet women were willing to go to establish kin networks, the tremendous importance of these networks to “successful aging” is revealed.

Works Cited


