

Welcome to Russia

The Russian character has been formed over centuries and traditions persist despite 70 years of communism.

America and Russia Similarities

Both countries are multi-ethnic, continental, great powers, expansionist, tamed a wilderness, and settled by a variety of diverse groups. Both regard themselves as chosen nations with a messianic mission, destined to bring their own versions of enlightenment to less fortunate people. They are both Nuclear powers. The countries both think BIG, are energetic and inventive. The people appreciate casual, direct, and an often blunt way of speaking, and both show heartfelt hospitality to visitors from abroad.

Historical America and Russia Contrasts

	America	Russia
Authority	Diffused from people, flows up	Centralized, flows down
Change	From below, individual	Imposed from above, society
Rights	Celebrated, protected	Subordinated for communal good
Diverse Views	Tolerance, pluralism	Consensus, single truth
Economy	Private free market	Government-centered
Cultural roots	Western Europe	Europe, Asia
Warfare	Wars fought mostly abroad, little/no devastation	Constant cruelties, wars, devastation, hardships

The Cold North

Living for centuries in a very harsh climate explains the Russians' strength, their ability to endure extreme hardship, and their bleak outlook on life. It also explains their patience and submission. Climate has also contributed to a cautiousness they exhibit.

Distance and Isolation

Russia is a great distance from other centers of civilizations; for example, 3,000 miles from Paris, a month's journey before railroads. It has only limited access to the sea, deterring development of a mercantile tradition. Geography also has made Russia vulnerable to wars, due to her lengthy borders which had no natural defenses. The Russian people see Russian expansion as a consequence of victories over foreign invaders. America's commercial experience and Russia's lack of a mercantile tradition have given the two countries different world outlooks. Commerce is by its very nature conducive to compromise. Nations raised on it instinctively seek a common ground for agreement, that exact point at which the other side might be prepared to make a deal. Compromise is native to America, but not to Russia. The oceans, moreover, have been bridges to America for cultures and ideas. The new has been welcomed in America; the old has been revered in Russia.

Communalism

Communal spirit and togetherness distinguishes Russians from Westerners. Individualism and competitiveness are more common in the West; they are esteemed characteristics. Russia has a history of the agricultural village commune, with the land held in common and decision-making determined by the assembly of heads of households. The objective was to find the collective will, which after discussion and opposition ceased, a consensus evolved which became binding on all households. This system endured until 1930 when it was brutally replaced by force into collective farms. The immediate result was famine and the death of millions in the countryside.

The affinity for the group can still be seen today in everyday life, in group dating, and physical contact with strangers. Pushing and shoving in crowds bring no hard feelings. In restaurants Russians will not hesitate to join a table with strangers rather than dine alone. Men kiss men and show affection, women hold hands while strolling. Recreation is often arranged in groups, often with colleagues they work with. They prefer organized sports with set teams. Russians feel free to tell you if you or your child is not dressed warm enough. In general, in a collective society, everybody's business is also everyone else's.

Culture and Character

Egalitarianism is a social philosophy that advocates the removal of inequities among persons and a more equal distribution of benefits. This is rooted in the agricultural village milieu, not an invention of Communism. Peasants could not leave the mir without an internal passport, issued by their heads of household. Russians are still required to carry their internal passports with them at all times. Respect for authority was high. The concept of reward tied to performance was also alien, as was individual initiative. Many still view entrepreneurial activities as illegitimate.

Caution and Conservatism

Russians are more likely to be cautious and conservative defenders of the status quo. Their cruel climate, harsh history, and skeptical outlook on life has caused Russians to value stability, security, social order, and predictability, avoiding risk. The tried and tested is preferred over the new and unknown. Americans, as a nation of risk-takers, can have their patience tested by Russian caution, and anticipation of the negative.

Pessimism

Americans expect things to go well and become upset when they don't. Russians expect things to go poorly and have learned to live with misfortune. The American habit of smiling all the time can get on the nerves of some Russians. Despite their pessimism, there is an admirable durability and resiliency about Russians, a proven strength and endurance.

The Russian Soul

The Russian soul has been described as: sensitive, reverent, imaginative, an inclination to tears [but not publicly], compassionate, submissive mingled with stubbornness, patience that permits survival in what would seem to be unbearable circumstances, poetic, mysticism, fatalism, a penchant for walking the dark, introspective, sudden unmotivated cruelty, mistrust of rational thought, fascination - the list goes on. Russians maintain their integrity in a way that conforms to their inner notion of what a human being should be, with a blatant honesty and integrity seldom seen elsewhere in the world. Above all they have an appreciation for wholeness or complete commitment and faith, no matter what that faith might be related to.

Big is Beautiful

Russians are impressed with size and number, and much that they do is on a grand scale: military size, buildings, sculpture, etc.

Order and Disorder

Americans are often annoyed by the inconveniences caused by the seemingly inefficient and lackadaisicalness of the way things are done in Russia, including shopping, driving, agricultural poor planning, etc.

School Days

An extensive system of public schools blanketed the country, eliminated illiteracy, and raised the general level of learning among the populace. Russia has one of the lowest illiteracy rates in the world. A noticeable difference in the students is a lower ability to think for themselves. "Higher Level Thinking Skills" is an unknown term in Russian education. Students are told what the answer is, not why the answer is what it is. "How did you come to that answer?" is not a question a Russian teacher would ask. It is simply right or wrong. Two plus two is four. The reason why is immaterial.

Personal Encounters

The City

Russian cities swarm with people. Most city dwellers live in small apartments in large multi-storied buildings rather than in detached houses. Around 15% live in communal apartments with several families in one apartment. Shopping takes an inordinate amount of time, and most items were formerly scarce and hard to find.

Friends and Familiar Faces

Russians rely on a close network of family, friends, and co-workers as protection against the risks and unpredictability of daily life. This extends into the business world as a way of getting things done. Friendship with a Russian is not to be treated lightly.

At Home

In public and at work, Russians can be brusque and discourteous, and they watch what they say, even in the age of glasnost. At home, within the intimate circle of family and friends, they feel secure and relaxed, warm and hospitable, sharing and caring, and they speak their minds. Hand shaking is a common practice, both on arrival and taking leave. (Shaking hands over a threshold is an omen of bad luck and should never be done. Moreover, if you bring flowers, bring only odd numbers.)

The Toast

Toasts are usually given at the beginning of the meal, or at the end, or throughout the meal. Very long meals are common. So is lots of alcohol.

Alcohol, the Other "ism"

"Demon vodka" as the Russians call it, is the national vice, a major cause of many social and relational ills.

Vranyo, the Russian Fib

Russians can fudge the facts, a national characteristic called vranyo. In its most common form, it is an inability to face the facts, particularly when the facts do not reflect favourably on Russia.

Nyekulturny. Bad Manners

Nyekulturny is the wrong way, uncultured, bad-mannered way of behaviour. Some examples are: wearing coats in public buildings that have a cloakroom, standing with your hands in your pockets, sprawling in chairs, placing feet on tables, crossing legs while seated so as to show the sole of a shoe, sitting with legs spread wide, crossing arms behind the head, draping an arm over the back of a chair, eating lunch on park lawns, whistling at home or on the street, whistling

In this motherland, women are strong, hard-working, nurturing, long-suffering, and the true heroes of Russia. Ninety percent are in the work force, where they occupy mostly secondary positions. Forty million Soviet men died in the three cataclysmic events of the Soviet era - 1) the collectivization of the agriculture, 2) the political purges, and 3) World War II [known as *The Great Patriotic War*] - creating a severe shortage of men for two generations of women. Although Russian culture is very male-chauvinistic in flavour, usually the women of the society are the responsible ones. Research done by Co-Mission in 1994 indicated that there was a tendency for Russian men to feel an inner guilt for being irresponsible, in both family and social roles. Russian women contribute to the situation by being excellent naggers. Rather than working through the problems, men often retreat to hanging around together smoking and drinking vodka late into the night, perpetuating the irresponsibility. Women are forced to take hold of the responsibilities, but not given the authority in family or society.

State and Society

The Russian Heritage

Russia has a history of power centrally concentrated in the economy, culture, education, media, religion, and citizens private lives. Initiative has been stifled in the process.

The Bureaucracy

Many officials in the USSR considered themselves a superior species, appointed to drive the herds of human cattle. Many Russians today still hold jobs because of nepotism, friendships, or former party membership. The result is often incompetence, sloth, conservatism, and a tendency to avoid responsibility by passing the buck to higher ups. Patience is the key thing to remember in dealing with the bureaucracy, and finding someone who knows the system, or better yet, someone who knows someone high up in the chain of command.

Corruption

The assumption that "everyone steals" has erased the nation's sense of right and wrong. Many involved in bribery and embezzlement see it as the only way to survive. They feel justified since, "everyone else is doing it." The police are notorious for corrupt behaviour. While Americans generally trust "the law," Russians have a tremendous distrust of government, police and the military.

The KGB

Russia has had a secret police since the sixteenth century when Tsar Ivan the Terrible established his Oprichnina to root out opposition. Over three and a half million (3,778,000) Soviet citizens were sentenced for counterrevolution activity or crimes against the state from 1930 to 1953. The KGB openly admits that 786,000 were shot to death in those 23 years. Many, many more actually lost their lives. The newly formed agency that replaced the KGB after Yeltsin took power has seemed to target issues related to business and commerce, although many of the same people are employed by the new agency.

The Law

The law in Russia has served to protect the state and the community rather than the individual. The leaders had the tradition of being above the law. Recently, most Russians, though motivated by fear, do not take the law very seriously. With the fall of Communism, there are often conflicting laws on the books, enforceable as police so choose at a given moment.

during applause, public displays of affection, telling a Russian that you have to go to the restroom (you should just excuse yourself), and merely lounging or sitting on the steps of a public building. Nearly all of these things seem rather "normal" to Americans. (Which of these things haven't you done today?) Drinks are always served with something to eat, even if only a cookie.

(In conservative church circles the list of unacceptable behaviour goes on: Praying sitting, praying chewing gum, or with your legs crossed, women with their heads uncovered, etc.)

Time and Patience

Time is money to Americans, and punctuality a virtue. Meetings are expected to start on time, and work under pressure of the clock is a challenge routinely accepted. To Russians, with their agricultural heritage, time is like the seasons - a time for sowing and a time for reaping, and a time for doing little in between. Communism reinforced this native disrespect for time because workers could not be fired and there was no incentive to do things on time. Russians are notoriously not on time, but do not necessarily consider themselves late. When they do arrive, there are a number of rituals before a meeting: First the small talk, then tea or drink, then talk of family and personal problems, then finally the business of the day.

The Russian Language

It takes about 10% longer to say something in Russian than in English. Russian is a Slavic language and easier to learn than Chinese or Arabic. In recent years there have been national discussions on the concern of the Americanization of the Russian language. As Russia flirts with the West again, many Western terms are entering into the vernacular. Slavophiles are quite concerned about the compromise of the language.

Misunderstandings

Language translation problems can happen. In English, one word may suffice to convey an idea, while Russian will have several words to choose from, each with a slightly different shade of meaning. Many Russians are not used to conducting business on the phone. The phone system is poor and telephone numbers are difficult to obtain. "Nyet!" is the common response to a request. Keep talking, smiling, don't get upset, don't raise your voice, and keep repeating your request. Sometimes money is needed to turn *Nyet* to *Da*.

Russians and Americans

Russians admire Americans as people, and generally bear no ill will toward them.

Negotiating with Russians

Russian proverb: "Don't hurry to reply, but hurry to listen." Americans generally regard compromise as desirable and inevitable, a logical way of doing business. Russians regard compromise as a sign of weakness, a retreat from a correct and morally justified position. They will often out-wait impatient Americans to produce more concessions from them.

Procedures and Tactics

Know what you want. Stick to it.

The Paperwork

Russians often like to put agreements on paper, even recording what was discussed in negotiations. They also like to fill out lots of little forms for Russian bureaucrats to sort through. e.g. Sending a parcel by mail takes filling out six different forms, all asking the same information. Although Russians like paperwork, take note that written documents and contracts are often worth less than the paper they are written on. Knowing the legal rule and rights are essential. Current legal counsel is very important in contracts.

Trust, but verify - Ronald Reagan (after an old Russian proverb). Areas such as determining profit or loss, or reporting on how funds were spent are not common skills developed under Communism.

Expect the Unexpected

Things seldom go as planned with Russians. They often say, "In principle, it can be done," but in practice, it may be another matter. Moreover, in trying to please and be good hosts, they may promise much more than they can actually deliver. A "yes", or "of course" does not always mean the same to Russians and Americans.

The Russian Heart

Seeing the real Russia

Hospitality is a great Russian virtue. An invitation to a Russian's home is a real treat and education into the true meaning of hospitality. Visit a small city or village to see the real heart of Russia. Visit stores, and churches, ride the Metro, go to a train station, In the big cities, experience the world class symphonies and ballets.

The New Russians

Russia has gone through several changes in the last few years. Visitors to Moscow just a couple of years ago would be very surprised at how "Western" downtown has become. Expensive shops line the main streets. International businessmen have rated Moscow as the most expensive city to conduct business, more costly that even Tokyo and New York.

The term "New Russian" has been coined for many Russian businessmen, some being quite well to do, even by American standards. This new pursuit-of-the-gold mentality is affecting the culture in general. Large screen TVs, VCRs, car ownership, remodels of city and country homes are now all commonplace. The zeal for the almighty dollar, or more accurately, less-than mighty ruble, is affecting everyone from the rich to the pensioner. Materialism has even roosted on Russian relationships. Russians have always had time for each other. Walks with friends, long conversations on the phone, and meals together were of great importance. With the pursuit of the microwave ovens and computers comes the requirement to work more hours, and for most Russians, at a variety of positions. While many Russians maintain their employ at their "main" job, such as being a teacher, or city employee, or doctor, they also have jobs on the side, such as tutoring, or selling things on the street, or developing a business.

Recent observation is that many Russians have less time for walks and talks. Perhaps the days of several workers standing around idly will come to an end...certainly a welcome thing for improving efficiency. But will the superb Russian character of closely connected relationships be compromised in the process of "getting ahead"?

Epilogue

The younger people are very open minded, well educated, and interested in new ideas. Many new things are happening politically, but *"whatever happens,"* says George Kennan, *"and whatever restructuring of the Soviet society, Russia is, and is going to remain a country very different from our own. We should not look for this difference to be overcome in any short space*