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The World of Ghosts

Common Threads in the Soviet Refugee Experience

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14 April 2019

## Table of Contents

3. - Introduction
  - The Ghostly Existence of a Refugee
4. - The Ghostly Existence of a Refugee (cont.)
  - “Soviet-Refugee Weekly” Genre 1
5. - Exile
  - “Attention! Poster” Genre 2
6. - Exile (cont.)
  - Skepticism
7. - Skepticism (cont.)
  - Otherness
8. - “The Oblivious Times” Genre 3
9. - Hatred
  - Conclusion
10. - Conclusion (cont.)
11. - Works Cited

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### The World of Ghosts

Why do we as societies, countries, and nations judge those who are without one? While that question may seem generalized, what is not generalized are the 25.4 million registered refugees currently living outside of their countries of origin (UNHCR). Though the number of displaced humans is so high, the rhetoric we engage in on this matter deals more with our own internal affairs and biases than any consideration of enhancing our own perspectives and empathy. To many, the conversation ends there; but what about for those who experienced displacement themselves? In Viet Nguyen's book *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* he features the individual stories of David Gezmozgis, Lev Golinkin, and Marina Lewycka, three past-refugees who all fled the Soviet Union in different stages of its infamous existence. All three of their stories provide essential insight into both the experience of the refugee and that of the toxic rhetoric people engage in regarding those who are displaced. Therefore, as the number of uprooted people throughout the world increases, David, Lev, and Marina's stories showcase how strong perceptions of ghostliness, exile, skepticism, and otherness dominate the reality of a refugee.

### The Ghostly Existence of a Refugee

People in their day to day lives can not begin to understand what it is like to exist in the world as a refugee, or as Lev calls it, "the world of ghosts." To exist in the world of ghosts is for

your existence to be not known at all. Comparing refugees lives to that of a ghost is a good comparison because their very existence is outside of the societal order we all abide by. As best put by Lev, “becoming a refugee means watching as those anchors are severed, one by one, until you’re floating outside of society, an untethered phantom in need of a new life” (38). They have no identification, no place of residence, and depend highly upon the aid of those who believe in



(fig.1 “Soviet Refugee Weekly” Genre 1)

them. In most situations their futures highly depend upon their luck and own sheer will to survive. Not only does the label fit the lives they live, but it also fits how their existence is seen by the world around them. Because we as citizens of first world countries are so far removed from the places and events refugees result from, we can easily just act as though they do not exist. Living in countries like the U.S. inherently gives its inhabitants the choice to not care

about the displacement around them. Though the reality of figuratively being a ghost is crucial to understanding the lives lived by refugees, so is the feeling of exile.

### Exile

Having all fled the U.S.S.R, David, Lev, and Marina all have a deep understanding of what it means to be in exile. They have all come from a country that never wants them back and are not wanted in any country by any means except political interest. This largely based on the system the U.S.S.R used for its own people as “all citizens had a residence permit-a propiska-which registered their homes with local authorities. People who moved to another part of the country without permission risked losing basic rights” (Economist). Even if they had not left the country, deserting their homes was enough to make them an enemy. In David and Lev’s



(fig.2 “Attention! Poster” Genre 2)

case, their Jewish heritage only makes their experience of exile more immediate, as anti-semitic sentiment finds its way into culture all across the globe. Because refugees make the necessary but damning choice to forgo having a home country, they exist in a constant state of exile from everywhere they are. The word exile is so important to understanding the experience of a refugee because it is more than just a situational circumstance, it is a state of being. Though exile grimly describes a reality of refugee life, to a normal citizen there is something to be said about how people approach the entire refugee experience with skepticism.

### Skepticism

The skepticism that the refugee experience is perceived with in places like America is largely why human displacement will always be prevalent and misunderstood. David Bezmozgis's family has tensions relating directly to this as he states in his story that his own parents approach the refugees of today with complete skepticism regarding their own need to assist them. He explains that "they see no incongruity. Those other refugees--particularly brown and Muslim--are not like them" (21). This is very interesting because one would assume that anyone who has experienced some larger form of displacement in their own life would show immediate empathy and understanding. This brings to light a shortcoming in understanding other people's situations because in hindsight anyone can separate their experiences from others and say the circumstances are different. That feeling of skepticism is highly connected to one's own specific lack of perspective and usually there are selfish biases and connotations behind it. On a federal level it is not difficult to see why our leaders would lead a selfish shift in rhetoric as "the government calculates that it costs \$7,000 a head to settle a refugee" (Economist). The biggest reason behind that lack of perspective in most discussions of refugee situations is people's own

self-centered need for the preservation of their way of life. Especially in western countries people see the realities and situations of refugees only through the opinionated lens of the news media, which always strives to figuratively paint displaced people as more than just helpless people fleeing terrible conditions. Because people can easily remove any emotion from their understanding of refugees' situations, those who are displaced are left feeling like they do not belong or have a place in society at all, like an other.

### Otherness

Otherness is a very essential feeling to the displacement of humans as leaving behind culture, home, family and friends leaves people with not much to hold on to. It is not hard to understand why otherness is such an unfortunate but crucial part of what it means to be a refugee, because one does not belong to or have a sense of community. Even when entering a new society that feeling can persist as it takes a long time for people to synchronize with new social environments and feel as though they belong and have value. In many cases cultural shifts are so heavy that that feeling of being an other never quite leaves, as no person wants to forgo the cultural values they once held close to them. In the case of those who already live in the country refugees come into, they only perceive the refugees as others because people are much less welcoming to cultures and values that they do not resonate with or understand. Because people inherently do not like sharing the same space with people they do not understand, it is not hard to see that lack of awareness can quickly turn into hatred.

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# The Oblivious Times

Anywhere, United States — March, 1985

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## **So-called “refugees” try to make a case to come to our great great country!!**

By Bill Whitey Whiterson Jr.

In a bitter exchange sparked by their own misfortunes and doing, Soviet born refugees attempt to make their case for why they should be allowed into our amazing country. Which, if I might add, is an amazing country. No country is better or cleaner. We are the best country and therefore can not allow for these economic migrants to milk our economy for every cent we have! All they want to do is come in here and ruin the purity of our culture and society! They even use their so-called “children” to tear at the heartstrings of the American public, which I can tell you is a big lie! Their children are holograms produced by their secret foreign telekinetic powers that want to take away your freedoms and ruin democracy. If my head was not so far up my own arse I might slightly understand the situation better, but all I see is the possibility of seeing foreign people and cultures and that is too scary to understand. So I am making up an entire false narrative to sell to the old and more susceptible people of the US so that we are not forced to be the country we were actually set up to be.

(Fig. 3 “The Oblivious Times” Genre 3)



## Hatred

In most western countries people subconsciously use their own lack of understanding and empathy to form hatred for refugees. People already have and commonly exhibit anti-immigration sentiment, so being forced to take in foreigners because they do not have a home to come from is even more infuriating. When these refugees begin to enter a country all those who do not understand the cultural differences see is their way of life at risk, that is when the deep feeling of hatred begins. In most situations, the cultural values and ethics of a refugees home country are opposite to that of their destination, so those who already call the destination home fear that outside influence will taint all that they have. As stated by Marina, “soon ‘economic migrant’ rather than ‘refugee’ became the accepted term for people fleeing wars and natural disasters, suggesting that these people were merely trying to better themselves financially and were therefore undeserving” (65). This change in rhetoric comes down to the basics of human nature in which those who are most fortunate would rather assist themselves than assist those who desperately need it. It also is much easier to gather hateful feelings when displaced people are seen as those who leech off of another person’s country. Across all forms of human displacement it can easily be seen that countries think of their best interest much before they consider hosting the lives of others.

## Conclusion

Overall, it makes great sense why those who exist without a home country try and stay as small and insignificant as possible as that gives them their best chance of survival. On the receiving end, people will always act towards what they believe is in their best interest and in terms of countries, that leads to discrediting refugees. Humanity’s selfish tendency to help

ourselves before others will always be why millions of humans are displaced across the world.

While the world shifts and different people from various places are exiled to find a new community to feel regain value in life, David, Lev, and Marina's stories are great examples of how one's own displacement and destroys one's own self-love. As the amount of displaced people in the world grows, so does every nation's responsibility to care for them. As time goes on and more people are in need of a new country to belong to, we can only hope that those who choose to fear and hate do not speak louder than those who choose to help.

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