

### ***No Happy End in Sight for Russia's Many Orphans***

**The Russia Journal** Being at the top of the charts charts in most areas is something of which to be proud. But Russia's ranking at the top of the tables for its extraordinary numbers of orphans is not a widely-publicized statistic.

The country's various orphanages, shelters, and boarding schools are home to over half a million children. Of these, few are even orphans in the literal sense of the word (that is, children who have lost both parents). Most fall into the category of "social orphans," children who have been abandoned by their parents or whose parents have lost their parental rights.

But regardless of how they came to be in state care, the majority of orphaned children meet a similarly bleak fate. Most children's homes are over-crowded and under-funded; up to 300 children of various ages may be living under the same roof. The result of such circumstances can be horrific: at least 5000 children end up in court each year, another 3000 become street children, and 1500 commit suicide.

The onset of Russia's financial crisis last August struck a new blow to children's welfare. Last year, children's homes received only 22 rubles per child a day, only eight rubles of which was used to buy food. Few resources to deal with Russia's growing number of orphans makes it difficult to improve the system that cares for them.

For many orphans, the best thing that could happen to them would be for some rich foreigner to adopt them and take them to a new life in a new country. But such adoptions have given rise to considerable controversy.

Some argue that the chance to create a new life elsewhere is the only way to spare these children the fate of prison or homelessness. Others argue that it is wrong to export children regardless of the promising future it may guarantee them, patriotically insisting that the children would be better off in their native misery than growing up amidst foreign prosperity. Horror stories about Russian children being taken abroad and sold for their body parts have been publicized to support the argument against this practice. But despite patriotic outcry and negative press, the adoption market has continued to grow over recent years.

The influx of foreigners interested in adopting Russian children first began in 1991. The Russian Education Ministry, responsible for the country's children's homes, quickly became aware of the potential gold mine they were sitting on, and in 1992 the Ministry set up a legal consulting agency called "The Rights of the Child." The agency had access to the federal database on children and dealt exclusively with adoption by foreigners. The agency was responsible for selecting children for adoption, getting their papers ready, investigating the prospective parents, arranging meetings with the children, and organizing their departures abroad.

But these were not the only services of the agency. According to the legislation at the time, foreigners could legally adopt only ill or disabled children. But because most foreigners interested in adoption wanted healthy children, the agency began producing falsified medical certificates which "diagnosed" healthy children as "ill" or "disabled." This corrupt practice allowed healthy children to be adopted and thus satisfied foreign demands, but it raised suspicions abroad. The Italian foreign ministry once asked the Russian authorities to explain how it was that between Moscow and Rome Russian children would be mysteriously cured of all their ills.

But the criticism of the agency held little weight against the money it generated. The official fee for adoption was \$1000, but at least five times that amount would actually be

paid to the agency for its services. Usually the adoptive parents would claim they were donating money to the home the adopted child had come from, when in fact most of the money went to the agency; the children's homes would only receive from \$100 to \$500 for each child adopted. The business was quite profitable and the agency made \$33 million in 1992 alone.

The agency no longer exists, but during the three years it was running it sent over six thousand Russian orphans abroad. A demand was thus created and other agencies have since carried on where "The Rights of the Child" left off, with foreigners now adopting five to six thousand children each year.

Nina Kostina, a Russian emigre now living in the United States, is just one of many who continues to arrange the adoptions of Russian children by foreigners. Her agency, "Frank," has also been much criticized. In the Duma, deputies indignantly waved about a document in which she referred to children as "items" and there she earned herself a reputation as a baby snatcher. However, though criminal proceedings are currently underway against her, in the meantime her business carries on unhindered.

The adoption of Russian children abroad is really no different than any other export market, with established players and prices. For \$20 000, prospective parents can request a child to meet certain specifications, choosing the age, sex, color of eyes and hair.

With so much money made through the sale of orphans, it will not be easy to put an end to this practice despite the backlash against it. The only alternative is to begin to improve conditions for the Russian orphans.

Despite the difficulties, attempts are being made to improve the lot of orphans in Russia. One children's home in Pechorii initiated a project two years ago to encourage the interaction between orphaned children and the local population, and as well to provide the children with some exposure to family life. The project asked for volunteer families to take children home with them during school holidays to give them a taste of life away from the institutional atmosphere.

The project seems to be successful and in 1997 twenty-nine children benefited from it. Some of the families even proceeded to adopt the children they had brought home. In 1998, volunteer families took in fifty-six children for the holidays, six of whom have now been adopted. As for the other fifty, most of the volunteer families have agreed to become the legal guardians.

Though the idea behind this project is beneficial and the results have mostly been positive, it has its drawbacks too. Not all of the families that take in children for the holidays are able to adopt them and often the children have difficulties readjusting to life in boarding school after having spent time in a real family environment. There have even been some cases of suicide.

An alternative method of improvement involves the creation of large foster families known as "family children's homes." In these "family children's homes," five to ten children live with "parents" who are paid by the state to care for the children. This state support includes stipends for the children's education through the age of fifteen, just as for a state-run children's home.

In recent years churches and other humanitarian groups have become more active in orphan children's welfare. There are now numerous children's homes run by monks and nuns, for example, and shelters for children who have been sexually abused.

Improvements are being made, but the fate of Russia's orphans is still unknown and the debate over the export of its children continues.