

# Creating a Home from Home: Russian Communities in the UK

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This study examines the idea of home and homemaking as complex and elusive phenomena that involve multiple social relationships, meanings and practices. By looking at the organisation of the domestic life and interiors of the homes of Russian migrants in the UK, this research explores the ways in which both Russian identity and the feeling of belonging to a homeland are created and maintained. The concept of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1996) deployed in the study provides an insight into the research of identity as imagined and flexible rather than solid and fixed. In particular, the material possessions of migrants are considered as the visible representations and manifestations of their imaginings of, and personal relationship to, their homeland, helping migrants to maintain connections with their cultures and home countries alive or, in fact, "to create themselves through the medium of stuff" (Miller 2009: 99).

To explain this relationship, the category of 'Russian-ness' has been developed, linking together the meanings of material possessions and the processes of creating and representing Russian identity. I define Russian-ness as the collection of elements of Russian culture that make a home Russian for its inhabitants. The category of Russian-ness also enables us to explain intangible but significant elements which permeate these homes such as memories and associations that specifically create a homely atmosphere and the feeling of being at home and belonging.

I conducted 30 in-depth interviews in people's homes. All participants were Russian migrants who came to the UK in three migration waves of 20th century. These are: the first wave that commenced after the Second World War; the second wave that occurred from the 1950 until the mid 1980s, and the third wave that started in the late 1980s onwards. A major part of the interview was devoted to the discussion of their material possessions, the homemaking strategies and the significance of those to their border experiences of living in the UK. In addition, I have taken photographs of some of the possessions and interior details.

The research revealed variations in the meanings of home possessions and participants' sense of Russian-ness. Two types emerged from the data. The first type, which I call 'refusers', reflected the identity and experiences of those who had an ambivalent attachment towards UK. 'Refusers' were generally unhappy with British culture, resisted all British influence, and tended to consider their home as an 'escape' into a familiar and comfortable environment where their possessions had a great deal of personal significance. The second, which I call 'acceptors,' related to those who had a positive image of the UK and used various means to integrate themselves into the receiving culture. They typically do not take their Russian possessions seriously and have a flexible stylistic approach to their home décor. There is a further dimension that is added to this dichotomy of 'refusers' and 'acceptors'. This dimension concerns the way in which possessions may carry with them 2 sets of meanings. The first I refer to as 'personal' meaning and the second I refer to as 'objective' meaning. The first refers to items that are subjectively defined by participants as

Russian, because they remind them of particular experiences and/or loved ones; while the latter refers to traditional Russian items and styles that look visibly Russian.

As my research shows the relationship between these meanings, identity and Russian-ness can be quite controversial and ambivalent. While for one group the idea of home and belonging is realised through their conflict with the receiving culture, for another group it is a way of integration and synthesis (Miller 2009) into a multicultural society.

'Refusers' tend to take their possessions seriously and their approach to homemaking can be compared to the practice of creating a museum, where they keep and cherish their artefacts. For them their home is 'heaven' where they can feel comfortable and be surrounded by familiar things. The practice of 'inhabiting and preserving memories' (Boym 1998: 521) becomes a part of their way of life; being in exile is a part of their way of being that they maintain while living abroad.

Correspondingly, the items they keep on display symbolise their struggle and remind them of their 'true' identity and their 'roots'. This group was particularly keen on accumulating traditional folk souvenirs, arty craft and matrioshka dolls which they often placed on display around their homes. On the opposite, for many 'acceptors', placing fewer or more matrioshka dolls, Russian books and icons on display, is not only a way of manipulating the appearance of their home but also a way of integrating into the English context. 'Acceptors' are more open to change; to have changes in their life is one of the reasons they give for migration. They would like to have a mixture of experiences and as a result, a mixture of objects in their home, but they can easily change their attachments if they need to. According to 'acceptors', having matrioshka and other souvenirs helps them to stay connected to their native land and culture without trying to 'resist' the influence of English culture. In *Stuff* (Miller, 2009) illustrates this last point using the example of Caribbean migrants in modern London who choose the strategy of synthesis in order to keep their roots.

It should be noted that obviously, the presented typology represents analytically constructed ideal types. In reality, the two types are comprised of combinations of many different characteristics. What is important in this division is the principal difference in the significance of the home possessions to their sense of Russianness, which consequently affects the way two groups of migrants choose and explain the meaning of their home possessions and overall homemaking. While the 'refusers' tend to cherish and personalise their Russian possessions, the 'acceptors' are more relaxed about the material part of their life. Although the 'acceptors' may have many different things brought from Russia or given to them by family members, they feel at liberty to leave them all behind in an instant, for example, if they were moving away. They take care of their possessions and are attached to them, but do not consider them to be their only important, or irreplaceable objects.

Currently, I am working on the developing the ideas presented above in the two forthcoming articles in one of which I focus on the methodological aspects of the research of homes and material cultures in the context of migration; and in another I discuss the particular characteristics of Russian identity and the practices of homemaking. I am open to feedback and discussions on the subject.

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