

Natasha's predicament

Scholarly source:

Mead, Margaret & Calas, Elena (1955). Child-rearing ideals in a postrevolutionary context: Soviet Russia. In M. Mead and M. Wolfenstein (Eds.) *Childhood in contemporary cultures*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 179-201.

Meet Natasha

Natasha Chernakov was thirteen-years-old in 1934. She was a Communist youth living in Soviet Russia. Natasha was facing a serious predicament.

But before we get to that, let's learn a little about Natasha's world.



Natasha's world

Just a few years before Natasha was born, Russia changed its government. For nearly 200 years Russia had been ruled by emperors called czars. But in 1917 the common people revolted and ultimately set up a Communist government. The new nation was called the Soviet Union or USSR.

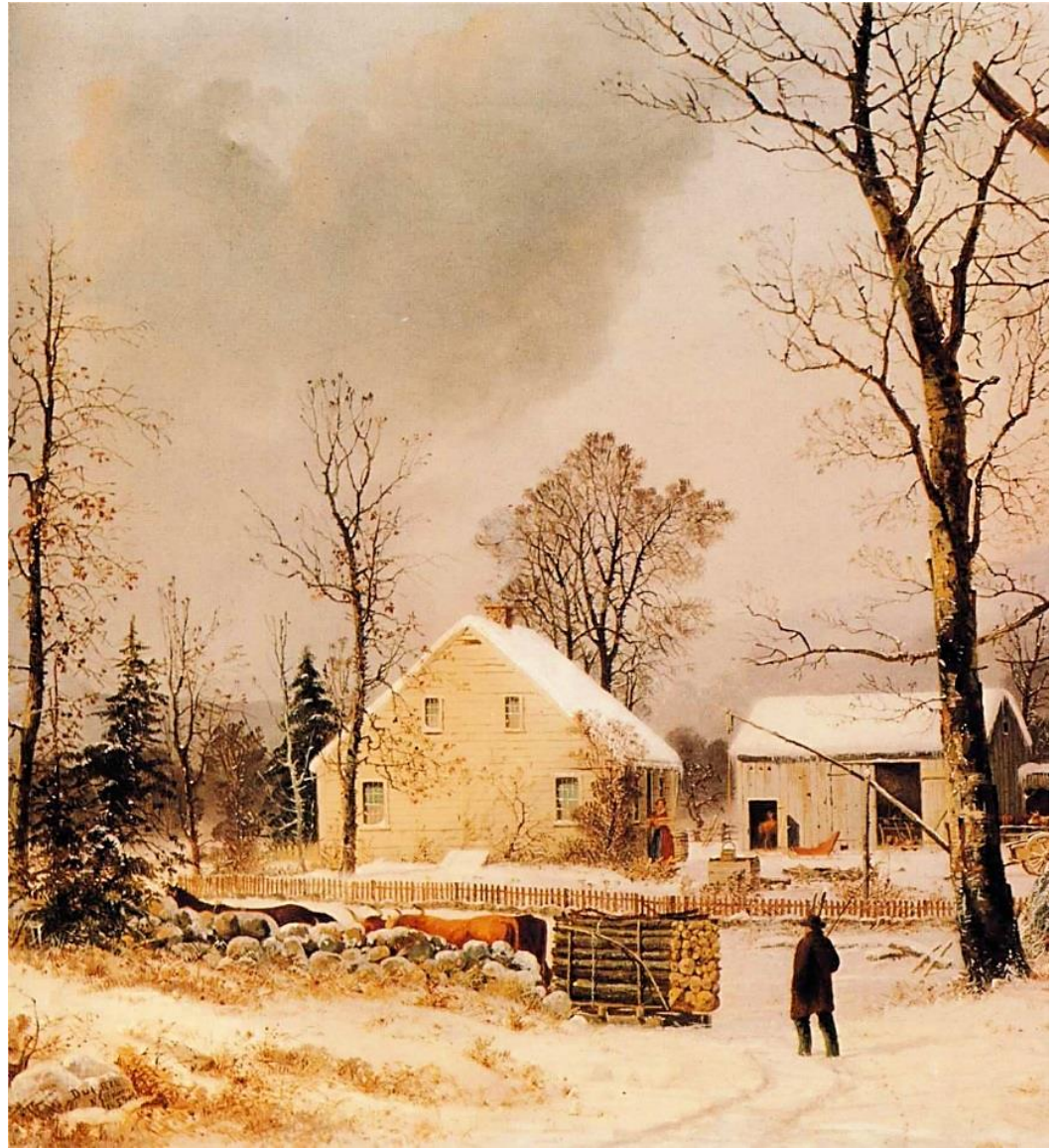
The Communists believed that the people as a whole should own all the land and this land should be worked for the benefit of all the people.



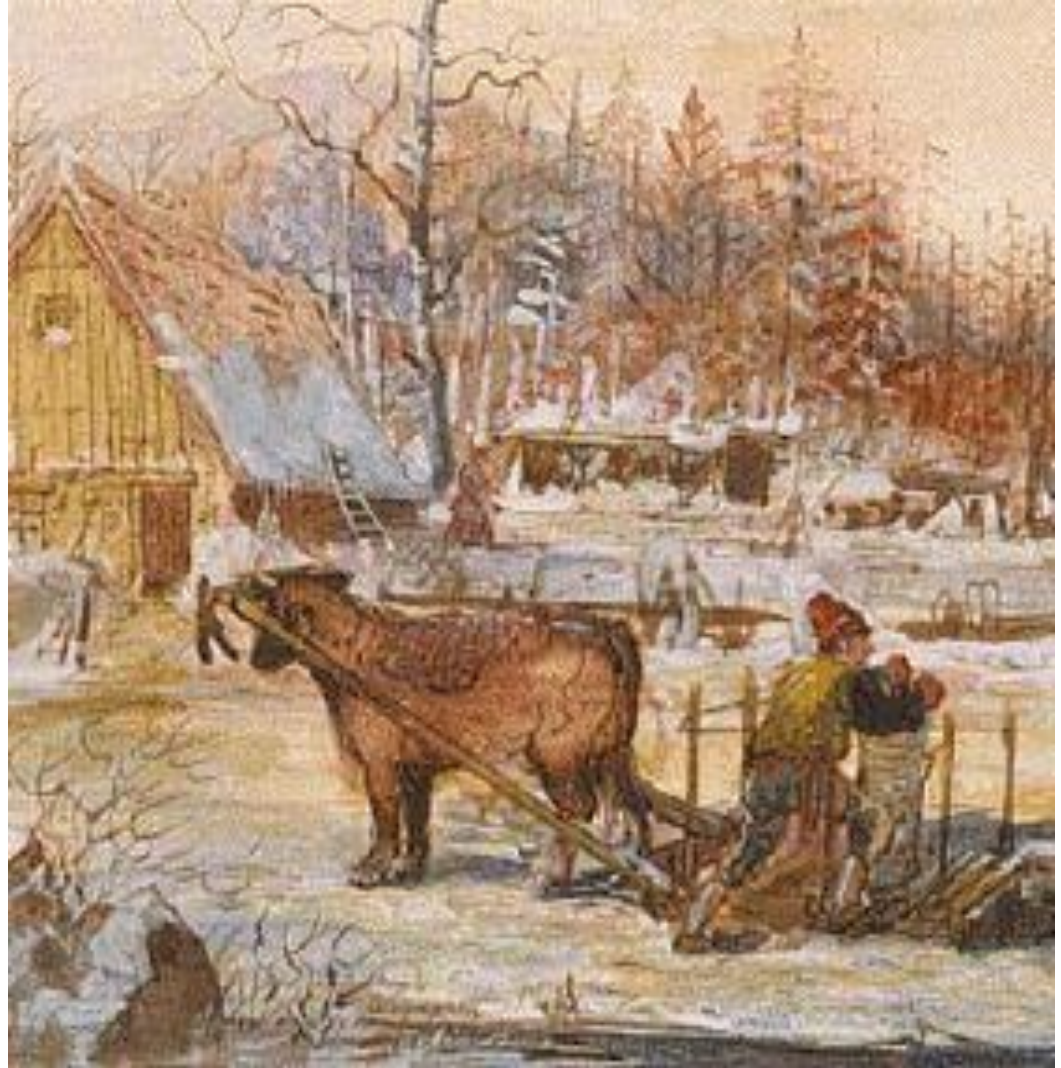
Communist leaders were put in positions to plan all major social and economic activities so that the activities would lead to this shared ownership of lands and other means of production, like factories and mills.



In the early years of the new Communist system, the Soviet Union (USSR) pretty much stayed apart from the rest of the world. Their people didn't do much trading with other countries.



Because they weren't part of the international economy, the Soviet Union was not really affected by the *Great Depression* that had thrown the rest of the world into overnight poverty.



The Soviet Union was trying to make all the products they needed themselves, so they wouldn't have to trade with other countries.

Natasha's family had been successful farmers before the Communists took over. They were forced to give up their own farm lands and move to a collective farm owned theoretically by all the people. Communists did not believe folks should own their own property or be richer than others.



Natasha spent much of her time in a daycare center where the teachers taught her the Communist principles. The children all dressed alike. She was taught to study hard at school but not to strive to make herself better than the others. She should only work to improve the whole group and the nation.



The family member she saw most often was her 95-year-old great uncle who was a teacher at the center. Uncle Igor loved Natasha very much and made sure she kept up with her school work.

"Things are better now for the kids," Igor would claim. "In my childhood we were trained to stand up straight for hours without moving a muscle. It was considered the mark of a good child. In the church we stood for the entire services, which would last all morning into the afternoon. My back would ache all the time."



Natasha's parents attended the Russian Orthodox Church. But after the revolution, church attendance was discouraged by the Communists, and public displays of religion were outlawed. The Soviet rulers felt they were bad for the people because they gave them false hopes of heaven, when they believed all the hope they really needed came through the goals of Communism.

Natasha, being a good Communist, avoided any connection to religion.



With Uncle Igor's help, Natasha studied hard and stayed in good standing with the Communists. She was made a Pioneer.

Pioneers were formal groups of youth in schools. They had the responsibility of making sure all the kids kept the Communist principles of hard work and caring about the group more than the individual.



The Pioneers were also taught to inform on any people they knew to have "bourgeois attitudes." People with these attitudes wanted a lot of things that others did not have or ignored the interests of the group.



As Natasha got older, she spent more time away from the daycare center and more time with her parents. They lived in a small cottage with the family, Natasha's grandparents, and Uncle Igor.



That's when she began to see her parents' hostility toward the Communist order.

"In my day we could afford to buy cakes and pies," complained her mother often "Now you can't even find any, much less buy them."

Natasha feared that her mother was exhibiting a "bourgeois attitude."



"We used to have a large house and now we're stuck with this little thing," grumbled her mother, holding up a painting of her childhood home.

Natasha just cringed.



The complaints seemed to go on forever. Natasha thought that she might have to take the problem to her Pioneer group. She knew that her parents would be investigated and probably sent to a prison camp somewhere in the frozen land of Siberia.

She tried to talk to her mother. "Look how we have it today. In other countries they are in this terrible depression because they were too interested in getting rich. You would have lost everything you had anyway."



"But I still would have freedom to do as I like, and to worship God in public," her mother snapped back.



Natasha nearly cringed. She was at least sure that her parents did not openly push Christianity any more.



Then one morning Natasha went looking for some paper and found a pile of handbills announcing a public demonstration for religious freedom.

Were her parents secret agitators?



That night, Natasha pretended to go to a Pioneer meeting as she usually did. Instead she stayed behind and followed her parents. They went to the church. Natasha looked inside and there she saw them. Her parents and others were planning a protest for religious freedom.



What was she to do? She decided to find *Great Uncle Igor* first and tell him before she took it to her Pioneer group.



Uncle Igor listened very carefully.

And then he decided what to say to his grand niece.



"Natasha, my child," he began. "I lived through much in my 95 years. I was a child during the Crimean War when we fought the Ottoman Empire. Then there was the Caucasian War. Our family lost so much during those times."



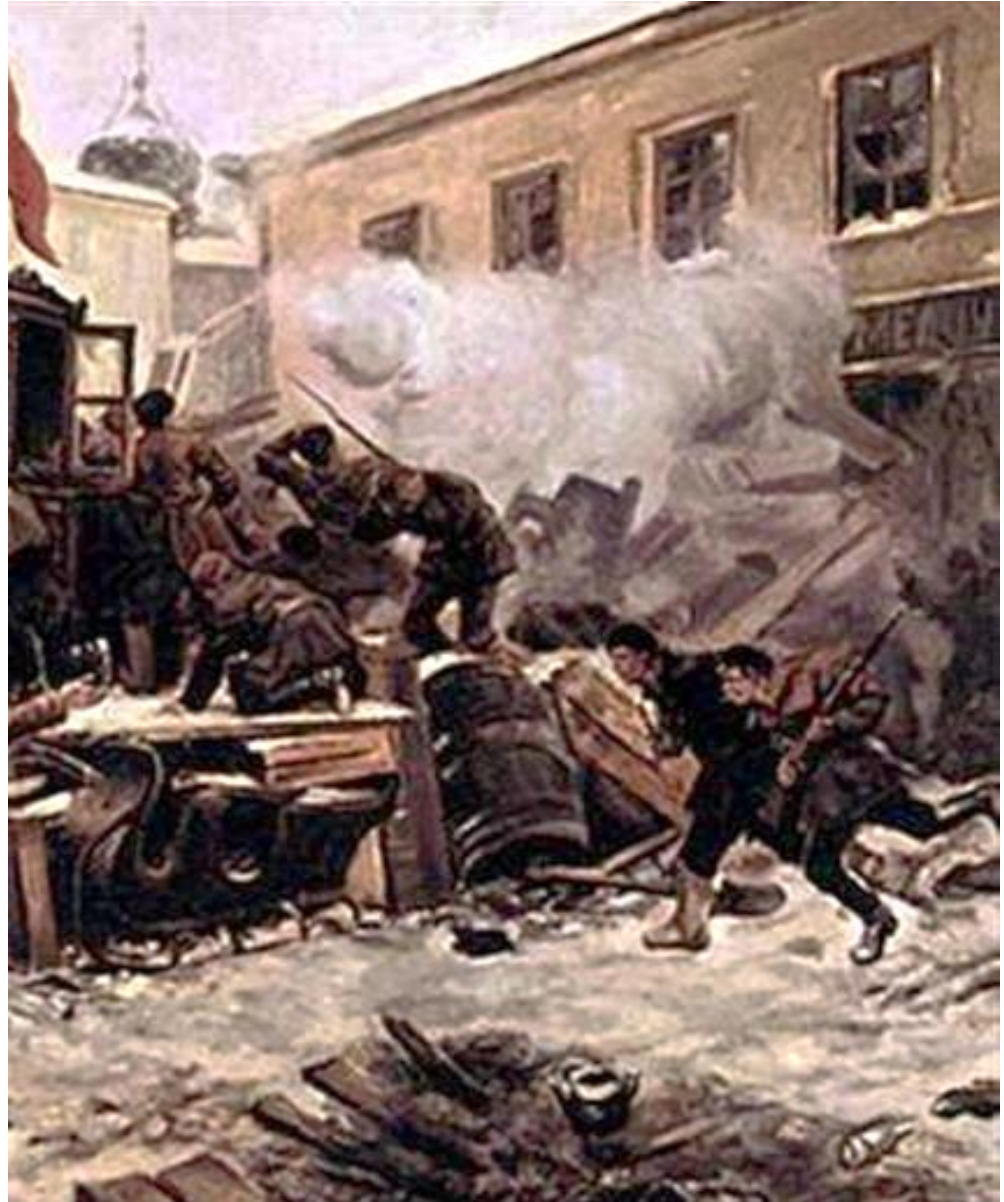
Igor continued. "I lived through decades of student protests against the Czars. I remember the revolutionary group, Land and Liberty, and the splinter terrorist group, People's Will, that assassinated our Czar Alexander. Then there was Bloody Sunday when so many young people were killed.

At that time we didn't know what would come of Russia—what our futures would be."



"If that wasn't bad enough, in 1904 we were attacked by the Japanese. And in the middle of that war we had the Russian Revolution of 1905.

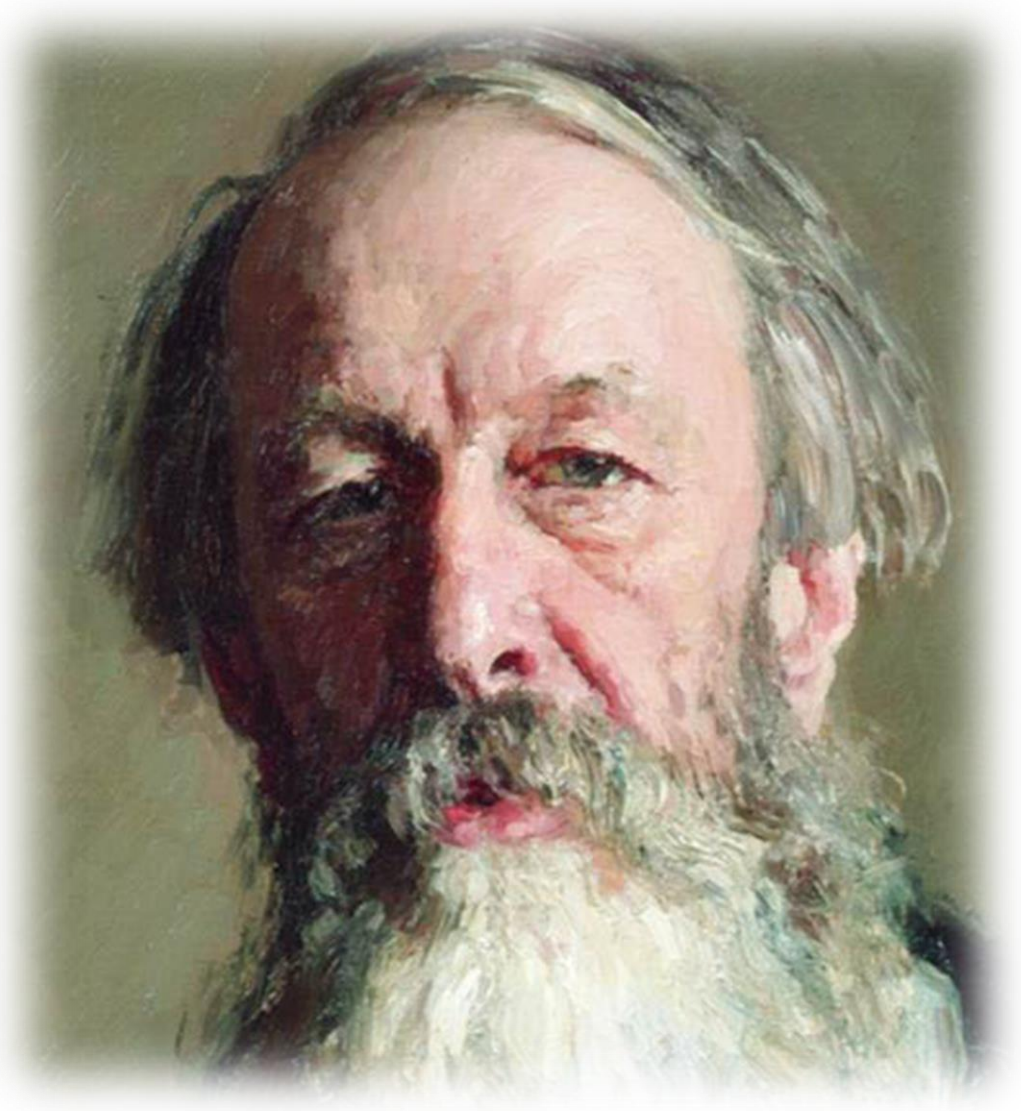
"But in a few short years, all the reformers found themselves fighting the Germans in the *Great War*."



"And before that war had even ended we found ourselves in the last revolution in 1917."



"My dear child, do you understand why I'm telling you all this?"

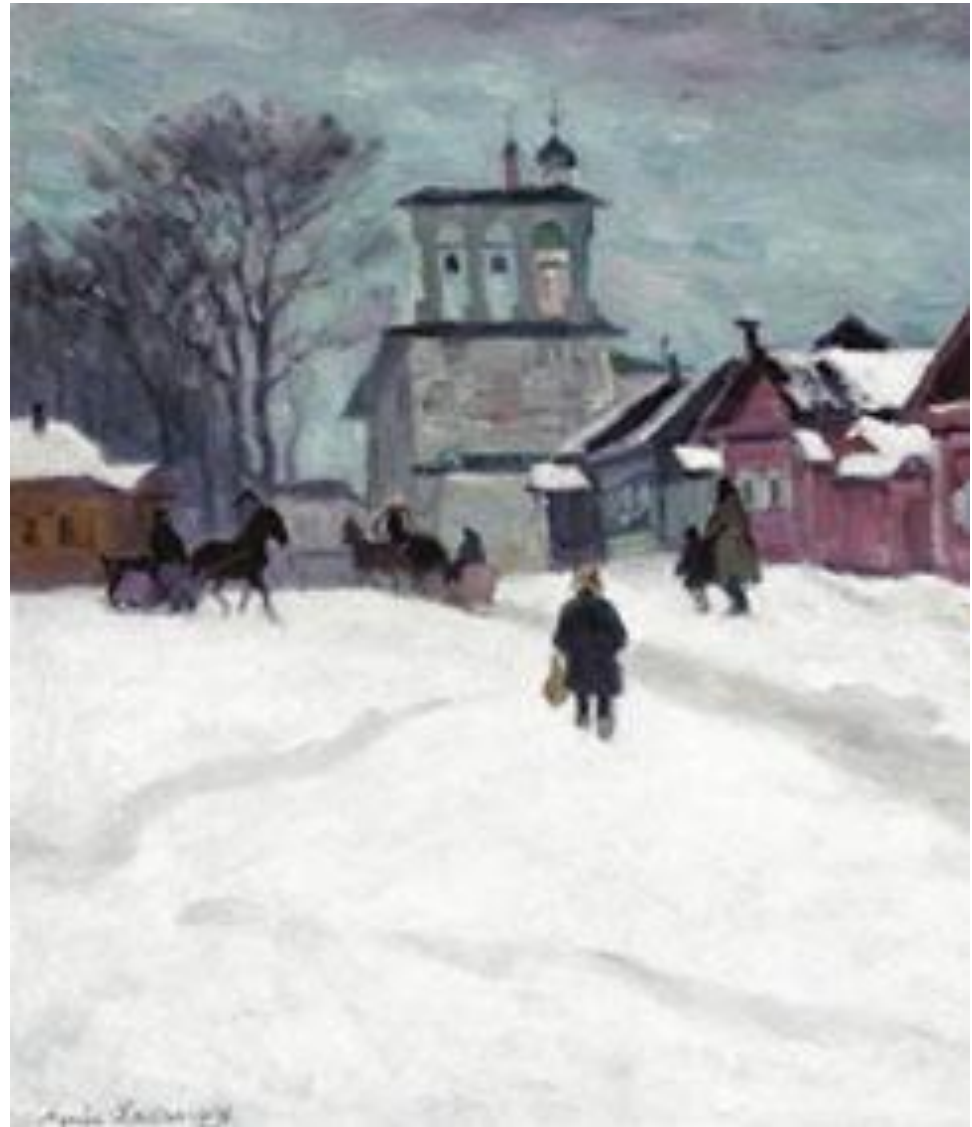


Natasha gave it some thought and then smiled. "Well, I guess it's that so much changes in someone's lifetime."



"Exactly," responded Uncle Igor. "But do you know what does not change? Do you know what stays the same when everything else falls apart?"

Natasha understood what he was getting at. "The family," she answered. "I will always have the same parents, the same siblings, no matter what happens to the country."



"Yes, your family will always be your family. But you don't know if the Soviet Union and all of its Communist policies will just disappear one day.."



And Great Uncle Igor's words proved to be prophetic. Natasha never reported her parents and they were never sent to Siberia. She went on to get married, have children, and eventually have grandchildren.

In 1991 she still had her mother in her household, one of her daughters, and several grandchildren.



And in that same year, the Soviet Union completely dissolved. It sunk into a sea of newly independent nations, never to be seen again.



The end

Let's talk!!!