

# POV

Community  
Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

## My Perestroika

A Film by Robin Hessman



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## My Connection to Russia

I have been curious about Russia and the Soviet Union for as long as I can remember.

Growing up in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was impossible to miss the fact that the USSR was considered our enemy and, according to movies and television, plotting to destroy the planet with its nuclear weapons.

Interest in the “evil empire” was everywhere. When I was seven, my second grade class made up a game: USA versus USSR. The girls were the United States, with headquarters at the jungle gym. The boys were the USSR, and were hunkered down at the sand box. And for some reason, the boys allowed me to be the only girl in the USSR. And thus, I was suddenly faced with a dilemma. My best friends were girls, but I was a curious kid, and I wanted to know what was going on in the USSR. Unable to choose between them, I became a double agent.

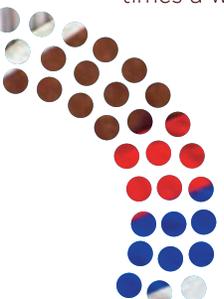
I suppose it was my insatiable curiosity about this purportedly diabolical country that led me to beg my parents to allow me to subscribe to *Soviet Life* magazine at age ten. (I have no idea how I even knew it existed.) As children of the McCarthy era in the 1950s, when thousands of Americans were accused of disloyalty and being communist sympathizers, my parents were concerned about the repercussions that the subscription to *Soviet Life* could have on my future. They told me that I would be placed on a blacklist and would be unable to get a job when I grew up. However, I pleaded and they gave in. It came each month in a brown paper wrapper so not even the mailman could see what a subversive magazine I was reading.

I can't say that I read it very closely. It was, after all, published by the Soviet Foreign Ministry and filled with dry, poorly translated articles about new Soviet technological achievements and grain harvests. But the photographs fascinated me. They were a far cry from the images on the nightly news my parents watched that showed only missiles and tanks parading through Red Square, or lines of people dressed in gray waiting for bread. The photographs of children especially intrigued me. They were like me, but they were different. They wore funny red kerchiefs around their necks. Or stood in dark glasses getting vitamin D from glowing green lamps. They also played Chinese jump rope, it seemed. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be one of them. They certainly didn't *look* evil.

I continued to read about Russia as I got older. I read Russian literature, including the greats — Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Bulgakov, Gogol. In 1989, when I was a senior in high school, the Berlin Wall fell. I first heard about it in school at 8 a.m. the following day, from my Russian history teacher. Throughout autumn 1989, Soviet-controlled governments were collapsing in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. It seemed as though the map of the world was changing almost every day. I tried to imagine what it was like for ordinary people to live through such incredible and rapid changes. In early 1990, I started studying Russian language, and I wanted to go to the USSR as soon as possible and experience it for myself. Too much was happening to sit and wait until I was a junior to do the standard year abroad. So, at age 18, in the second semester of my freshman year of college, I went to Leningrad. It was January 1991.

I remember landing on the snowy tarmac where men in huge fur hats stood waiting; receiving my first batch of ration coupons — food at that time was incredibly scarce — and catching the first glimpse of a giant neon hammer and sickle perched atop a building, glowing through the overcast winter day, as we were driven to our dormitory on Vasilevsky Island. The enormous 28-story, mile-long school dormitory looked like something out of George Orwell's *1984*, which I had actually read on the plane on the way there. There was a giant army tank in front of our building, and children would climb up it and swing on its turret, as if that were its only purpose.

It was the last year of the USSR's existence, but of course, at that moment, no one could have guessed the country would be gone in so short a time. Every time I turned around, I would see another monument to the country's great past. Despite the lack of food, there was a sense of optimism in the air. People gathered around television sets and discussed politics with intensity — a fervor that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier, I was told. It's odd to remember now, since so much has changed, but in those days we had a sense that world peace was actually at hand. The friendships forged then between Russians and Americans had a heady, euphoric feeling. We were snubbing our own countries' pasts, almost in an attitude of proud defiance, although no one was actually forbidding it anymore. I made many friends, went to the Philharmonic several times a week (it cost only pennies) and wandered the streets, photographing the city in my spare time.





I loved that I could stand on a street in the center of the city and not know what century I was in. There was a timelessness to everything, due at least in part to the fact that there was no advertising. Wandering around the snow-filled streets, where stores had names like MILK or MEAT or BAKERY #32 that announced bluntly what was sold there (or not sold there — a frequently told joke at the time: Man goes into a store. “Don’t you have any meat?” he says. “No, we don’t have any fish. The store that doesn’t have any meat is across the street.”), I was surprised that nothing I had read in the years leading up to this trip had truly prepared me for what it would feel like to actually be there.

I stayed in the USSR through the summer and got a job at LENFILM, the Leningrad Film Studios. The film I was supposed to work on was shooting in the KGB building, but I didn’t have security clearance, so I was transferred to work on an American horror movie. Then one day I arrived at work only to be sent home. The reason? “Military coup.” It was August 1991.

As throngs of people filled the streets, agitated and debating with total strangers on every street corner about what was happening, I wandered around listening to passionate opinions and expressions of hope dueling with fatalistic resignation. I was filled with anxiety that it was all coming to an end so quickly. The borders would close, I would be sent home, I would never see my Russian friends again and the Cold War would continue. I will never forget being surrounded by thousands of people in a public square, crying and yelling with joy when it became clear that the coup had failed. The euphoria and optimism about the future were overwhelming.

The Soviet Union fell apart in December 1991. For the next eight years, I lived in Moscow, the capital of the newly democratic Russian Federation. I went through the five-year directing program of VGIK (the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography) and made my first short films. For several years I produced *Ulitsa Sezam*, the Russian *Sesame Street*. We created Russian Muppets, wrote a Russian alphabet song and reveled in the new ways of doing things. (Yes, we could hire writers who were not members of the Soviet Writers’ Union. Yes, we would have open auditions when casting puppeteers for our Russian Muppets. Yes, it was okay for a children’s show to include rock music, and no, we would not have to talk down to the kids or be patronizing and didactic.) My community of friends included people who had grown up all over the USSR, and I found myself completely integrated in a world that once had seemed foreign to me. Russia was now simply my home.

All the while, inflation spiked and fell, Western stores (like The Great Canadian Bagel) appeared and disappeared, prime ministers were sacked, governments dissolved, bombs were set off and currency was devalued. But all of that was the backdrop to everyday life, which continued, as it always does.

## Making the Film

I began thinking about making this film when I returned to live in the United States in the fall of 1999, after more than eight years living in Russia.

Although the Cold War had ended, information about contemporary Russia still had not permeated U.S. culture. People were either amazed that I had not been murdered by the Russian mafia, or surprised that there were any problems left, now that Russia was a democratic country and no longer our arch enemy. Friends wanted an easy summary of what it was like, or how Russians had weathered the changes. But the complexity of Russia and its people was impossible for me to sum up in a few words.

I thought a lot about my generation of Russians, the people my age who had grown up there. They had typically Soviet childhoods in a world no one imagined would ever change. Then, as they were teenagers and coming of age, society’s very foundations were shaken. Everything that they had assumed to be true was now in question. And then, as they graduated from college, the USSR collapsed. They had to navigate the already difficult transition to adulthood while everything around them was in flux. They were immigrants in the land of their birth, strangers in a society without guidelines as to how things should be — an existence significantly different from a citizen’s life in Soviet times, marked by structure and predictability.

Even my film school friends had started studying under the assumption that upon graduation they would be assigned film studio jobs that they would hold for the rest of their lives. They couldn’t have predicted that new things like music videos and commercials would be born — and that they would need to scramble to earn a living.

In September 2004, I received the position of filmmaker in residence at WGBH, the Boston PBS affiliate, where I began working on **My Perestroika** full-time. Within six months, I was back in Russia.

I spent hours in the state film archive outside of Moscow watching newsreels of the 1970s and 1980s. I began to interview dozens of thirty-somethings from all walks of life. I



thought about how to bring the personal, intimate and human aspects of life in the USSR alive for a Western audience. I searched for home movies of the period. Unlike both Soviet and Western propaganda, such movies are free of any agenda. Part of their beauty is the purity of their intention — to preserve family memories for later generations. There is no better way to gain an intimate view of the past than to watch such home movies.

After interviewing dozens of people, I found myself thinking a lot about the constant rewriting of history in Russia. There is even a saying about this: *In Russia, it's the past that is unpredictable*. I decided to speak with history teachers of my generation. They had been taught one kind of history as children, and now they were teaching a very different history to their students. That's when I met Borya and Lyuba Meyerson.

The Meyersons were incredible. They were completely unselfconscious and very open, and they were passionate about history. Although they grew up across the street from each other, they had completely different childhoods. Borya tried to subvert the system whenever he could, and he often got into trouble for it, while Lyuba was fully devoted to the rules and rituals around her. (They belied the impression we'd been given in the West that Soviets all believed the same things — something I learned for myself, of course, as soon as I arrived in the USSR, but an important idea I hoped to illustrate in my film, as well.) The Meyersons had a wonderful way of tying their larger understanding of what had happened in their country with small, personal details of the effect it had had on them. And their 9-year-old son, Mark, was precocious and funny and even went to the school where they taught. The icing on the cake was that when I asked, as I always did, if they knew anyone who had home movies from the 1970s or 1980s, Borya opened up a closet stacked with 8mm film cans. His father had been obsessed with making home movies. To my utter amazement, he had even followed Borya into school many times and filmed him and his classmates. While I had always intended to feature a lot of 8mm home movies of people who were my age in the film, I'd never dreamed I would have footage of the actual subjects of the film as children!

From there, Borya and Lyuba introduced me to their former classmates. I met Olga, Ruslan and Andrei, who, together with the Meyersons, became the five protagonists of my film. I began filming them at home, at work and with their families. I also began spending more and more time with the Meyersons. They introduced me to the indomitable Sergei Lvovich Mendeleevich — the director of School #57 — who gave me his blessing to film there.

All in all, from 2005 to 2008 I filmed just under 200 hours of material, spending three to seven months in Moscow each trip. I did not intend to shoot the film myself when I started, but after two days of working with a cameraman, I saw that my subjects behaved quite differently when he was present as compared to when I was alone with them. From then on, I shot mostly by myself. Most days when I was filming, I didn't know in advance what would happen. But that meant that in response to a phone call, I had the freedom to swing the camera bag over one shoulder, the monopod over the other, put on a backpack loaded with additional gear and unsteadily teeter towards the Moscow metro. In retrospect, I can't imagine making the film any other way.

I also gathered 200 reels of 8mm home movies, not only from the Meyersons, but also from people their age all over the Soviet Union. These films came via friends of friends, bloggers and online communities and train conductors from Siberia, who met me on railway platforms and handed over paper bags filled with 8mm reels. I also sat in several different archives in Russia, looking at official footage from the Soviet period.

Weaving together these different kinds of footage, the personal stories of the five protagonists and the history of Russia itself over the past 40 years was quite a challenge. I was lucky to work with two very talented editors in post-production. What was important to me all along was to maintain the intimacy of the personal stories in the foreground of the film. My hope has been to bring the audience into the homes, the kitchens and the memories of these five childhood friends to share the complexities of their experiences, their triumphs, their dreams and their disillusionment.

In a sense, this film is also about how politics and government — along with the headline events of history that happen during particular moments in our lifetimes — have profound effects on each of us. Although for most of us political events take place in the background of our private lives, they certainly influence us in ways we could never predict and sometimes don't even realize. Only at this point, in my thirties, can I see that had I not grown up at the end of the Cold War my life would have turned out completely differently. While the film is really about "their" perestroika, I know I have undergone a profound one of my own.

### **Robin Hessman**

Filmmaker, **My Perestroika**



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## INTRODUCTION

**My Perestroika** (87 min.) follows five ordinary Russians living in extraordinary times — from their sheltered Soviet childhood, to the collapse of the Soviet Union during their teenage years, to the constantly shifting political landscape of post-Soviet Russia. Rather than relying on historians or a narrator to interpret or explain events, this documentary relies on its subjects to tell their own stories. Contemporary interviews, along with footage rarely seen outside of Russia — including home movies from the USSR in the 1970s — paint a complex picture of the dreams and disillusionment of current Muscovites who were raised behind the Iron Curtain.

As an outreach tool, the film provides viewers with an opportunity to go beyond sound-bite news coverage or political propaganda to look at what happens to ordinary people when their society is turned upside down. Through the journeys of these former schoolmates — each of whom takes a very different path — we are invited to examine both their experiences and our own expectations about the benefits and limitations of free markets and democracy.

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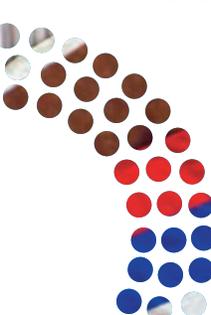
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**My Perestroika** is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- **Your local PBS station**
- **Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to the former Soviet Union, such as *Belarusian Waltz* and *The English Surgeon***
- **Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section, including groups of immigrants from the former Soviet Union now living in the United States**
- **High school students**
- **Faith-based organizations and institutions**
- **Cultural, art or historical organizations, institutions or museums**
- **Civic, fraternal and community groups**
- **Academic departments or student groups at colleges, universities and high schools**
- **Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as your local library**

**My Perestroika** is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- |                                   |                              |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Capitalism</b>                 | <b>Perestroika</b>           |
| <b>Cold War</b>                   | <b>Political science</b>     |
| <b>Communism</b>                  | <b>Propaganda</b>            |
| <b>Constructions of childhood</b> | <b>Psychology</b>            |
| <b>Culture</b>                    | <b>Reagan administration</b> |
| <b>Democracy</b>                  | <b>Russia</b>                |
| <b>Economics</b>                  | <b>Sociology</b>             |
| <b>Education</b>                  | <b>Soviet Union (USSR)</b>   |
| <b>Free markets</b>               |                              |
| <b>Freedom of speech</b>          |                              |
| <b>Foreign policy</b>             |                              |
| <b>Glasnost</b>                   |                              |
| <b>History (modern)</b>           |                              |
| <b>International relations</b>    |                              |
| <b>Media literacy</b>             |                              |
| <b>National heritage/identity</b> |                              |
| <b>Nuclear arms race</b>          |                              |
| <b>Oral history</b>               |                              |

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **My Perestroika** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a very wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit [www.pov.org/outreach](http://www.pov.org/outreach)



## Selected People Featured in **My Perestroika**

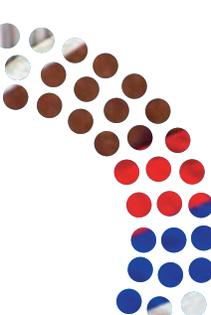
**BORYA** grew up in an intellectual Moscow family. As teenagers in the USSR, he and his friends were intent on subverting the system. Now he teaches history in Moscow's School #57 and manages all the school trips. He lives with his wife, Lyuba, and their son, Mark, in the apartment in which he grew up in a residential neighborhood of Moscow.

**RUSLAN** was one of Borya's best friends growing up. They got into trouble together in school all the time. Ruslan is a former punk rock star from the band NAIV who now occasionally gives banjo lessons and busks in the underground passages in Moscow. He is in a new punk-bluegrass band now called Boozemen Acoustic Jam. He is divorced from his second wife, but tries to spend time with their 8-year-old son, Nikita.

**ANDREI** has just opened his 17th store selling expensive men's dress shirts and ties. He is the only one of the classmates who moved out of his childhood home. His family lives in a new development of large luxury condos. Andrei's son studies abroad in France. Andrei is often frustrated by Russia's inability to be more like the West.

**LYUBA** was a self-described conformist growing up in the Soviet Union — even saluting when the Soviet national anthem played on television. She is now a history teacher who works alongside her husband, Borya. She has an enormous course-load and teaches classes six days a week to students who range from pre-schoolers to high school seniors.

**OLGA** was the prettiest girl in their class. She now is a single mother who lives with her sister, nephew and son in the apartment where she and her sister grew up, right around the corner from Borya and Lyuba. Olga works for a company that rents out billiard tables to pubs, clubs and casinos all over Moscow. She often saves money for international travel. She'd like to go on a safari in Kenya.





## USSR to Perestroika Timeline

**1914-17: World War I** begins in August 1914, with Russia entering the conflict as a member of the Triple Entente. Unemployment, military failures, hunger, ill-equipped soldiers and insufficient rations for civilian populations contribute to growing popular disillusionment and unrest both at home in Russia and at the front. The Tsarist regime suffers a crisis of the people's confidence from which ultimately it will not recover.

**February 1917:** The **February Revolution** deposes the Tsar and replaces the autocratic government with a provisional government and, shortly after, the Bolshevik (Communist) Party capitalizes on the revolution and stages an insurrection of its own. Bolsheviks storm through Petrograd (as St. Petersburg was called from 1914 to 1924), capturing government buildings. This second revolution, commonly known as the **October Revolution**, gives power to the Bolsheviks (led by Vladimir Lenin) but is not universally accepted throughout the country. Joseph Stalin makes his way into Lenin's inner circle and positions himself to assume power after Lenin's death.

**1917-22:** Five years of civil war between the Bolsheviks, or Reds, and anti-Bolsheviks, or Whites, end in victory for the Bolsheviks. The Communist Party is born out of the Bolshevik faction, and the Soviet Union is created as the world's first socialist state. When the **USSR** is established, it includes Russia (the largest constitutive republic), Belorussia, Ukraine and the Transcaucasian Federation (divided in 1936 into the Georgian, Azerbaijan and Armenian republics). In the decades following, the USSR grows to encompass 15 republics: Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Belorussia, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

**1917-24:** Lenin heads the Bolsheviks and the Soviet state, as Stalin strategically uses his position to put his supporters in important party positions. Lenin has a stroke and subsequently dies in January 1924. He leaves a testament praising Leon Trotsky for his leadership and administrative abilities and warning against Stalin's drive for power and "rude" behavior.

**1924-28:** Stalin manages to steal power from the rest of the party and begins to eliminate both those he (often arbitrarily) considers adversaries and those who represent the "old party" system, including Trotsky and thousands of other party, industrial and military leaders. To look the part of the heir apparent, Stalin has portraits commissioned of himself standing next to Lenin.

**1928: Joseph Stalin** begins ruling the USSR officially and remains at the helm until his death in 1953. He institutes a program of rapid social and economic transformation meant to put the Soviet Union on the world map as an industrialized superpower. Throughout Stalin's long rule, his brutality overshadows the communist ideals promoted during the revolution, leading people, especially in the West, to associate communism with cruelty and oppression.

**1928:** Stalin launches the Soviet Union's first five-year plan, inaugurating a process of large-scale industrialization and agricultural collectivization that will (at times violently) reshape not only the Soviet economy, but also the everyday lives of Soviet citizens.

**1932-33:** Stalin sets unreachable grain quotas and a terror-famine is then inflicted on the collectivized peasants of Ukraine. This famine results in the deaths of approximately 5 million people.

**1936-38:** In a series of purges that becomes known as **The Great Terror**, Stalin attacks those he suspects of being political opponents and potential counterrevolutionaries. The purges are characterized by widespread police surveillance, imprisonment and executions. They target members of political parties and the Soviet military, as well as entire ethnic groups.

**1941-45:** Twenty million Soviet citizens die during the course of World War II (in which the United States and Russia fight as allies), and the Soviet Union suffers an estimated \$128 billion in economic damages. Soviet human and economic loss is unrivaled in the war.

**1945:** At the end of World War II, the USSR expands its sphere of influence over several nations in Eastern and Central Europe. For the next several decades the **Eastern Bloc**, united under the **Warsaw Pact**, includes Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the USSR and, until 1948, Yugoslavia.

These nations are divided from countries in the West (members of the NATO alliance), by physical, military and ideological barriers that Winston Churchill labels the **"Iron Curtain."** Those who live "behind the Iron Curtain" are isolated by restrictions that prevent them from freely communicating with or traveling to Western nations.

**1946:** U.S. diplomat George Kennan articulates the notion of **containment** as the centerpiece of U.S. policy toward the USSR. Containment is defined as acting to stop communism from spreading beyond Eastern Bloc governments, and it ultimately leads to a quadrupling of U.S. defense spending



(making the United States the largest military power in the world). Also resulting from the containment policy are wars with Korea (1950–53) and Vietnam (1955–75), the Bay of Pigs invasion (1961) and the Cuban missile crisis (1962).

**1947:** The term **Cold War** is coined by Bernard Baruch to describe the tense relationship between the communist East and the democratic West.

**1949:** The USSR tests its first atomic weapon as part of an **arms race** that results from increases in U.S. defense spending (which the U.S. explains as necessary to protect democracies around the world from Soviet “expansionist tendencies.”)

**1953:** After Stalin’s death in March, **Nikita Khrushchev** assumes power and begins a process of liberalization that comes to be known as “the thaw.” In 1956, he delivers his famous “secret speech” to the 20th Party Congress, which denounces Stalin’s personality cult, brutality and abuse of power.

**1961:** Yuri Gagarin, of the Soviet Union, is the first human to enter outer space.

**1964:** Leonid Brezhnev has Khrushchev ousted and takes over leadership of the USSR, signaling the end of the thaw.

**1972:** U.S. president Richard Nixon adopts a policy of **détente** (or relaxation) toward the Soviet Union. He and Brezhnev sign the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I), which prohibits the manufacture of nuclear missiles on both sides, taking a major step toward reducing the threat of nuclear war.

**1973-75:** Borya, Olga, Andrei, Ruslan and Lyuba become **Octobrists**, the youngest level of Communist Party affiliation for children (named in reference to the October Revolution).

**1976-78:** Borya, Olga, Andrei, Ruslan and Lyuba join the **Pioneers**, the Soviet youth organization for children in middle grades. The Pioneers wear red neck kerchiefs.

**1979:** The USSR sends troops to Afghanistan, where they stay for the next nine years, leading some people to label the war “the Soviet Vietnam.” In protest of the Soviet military operations in Afghanistan, the U.S. boycotts the **1980 Summer Olympics** held in Moscow. Most Soviet children are evacuated from Moscow during the Olympics to avoid their having any contact with foreigners.

**1982:** General secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union **Leonid Brezhnev**, the only leader Borya and the others — now in their teens — have known, dies of a heart attack after 18 years of uninterrupted rule. The length of his reign, which came to be known, in

contrast with the thaw that preceded it, as “the stagnation,” is second only to that of Joseph Stalin’s. Sixty-eight-year-old chief of the KGB (the Soviet secret police) Yuri Andropov succeeds Brezhnev.

**1983:** Borya, Olga, Andrei, Ruslan and Lyuba join the **Komsomol**, the Communist Youth organization for children in upper school grades and young adults. It is assumed that all young people will join the Komsomol. It is difficult to get into any university or get a good job without having been a member.

**1984:** Less than two years after taking over, Andropov dies of kidney disease. He is succeeded by 72-year-old **Konstantin Chernenko**.

**1984:** Like all young men in the USSR, Borya, Ruslan and Andrei are drafted into the Soviet army. They serve the mandatory two years.

**September 1, 1984:** The First of September, also known as the Day of Knowledge, becomes a national holiday in Russia, formalizing the celebration of rituals that began in the 1930s. The holiday celebrates the new school year in general and specifically the incoming class of first graders attending school for the first time. Schools hold ceremonial lineups and other festive events, and one first grade child is selected to be paraded around the school courtyard on the shoulders of a final-year student while ringing the first bell of the school year. Traditionally, students and parents also give teachers flowers.

**1985:** Chernenko dies of emphysema after a little more than one year in office. The **Politburo** (the governing body) selects its youngest member, 54-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev, to be general secretary of the Communist Party, partly in response to the death of three heads of state in less than three years’ time, a group referred to as the “gerontocracy.” The term “gerontocracy” was coined in 19th-century France as a critique of a parliament made up of members who were almost all older than the majority of the adult population.

**1986:** In an effort to revitalize the flagging Soviet economy, Gorbachev introduces **glasnost (openness)**, a policy of increased political transparency of Soviet institutions and greater freedom of information. By introducing glasnost, Gorbachev hopes to restore pride in the country’s strengths while also acknowledging its weaknesses. In his book *Perestroika*, he writes, “We want more openness about public affairs in every sphere of life. People should know what is good, and what is bad, too, in order to multiply the good and combat the bad.” In a speech at the 27th Party Congress in February 1986, Gorbachev justifies the need for glasnost by



saying, “Truth is the main issue. Lenin said: More light! The Party should know everything!”

When Borya, Ruslan and Andrei return from the Soviet Army a few months later, they find the USSR has changed significantly.

**April 1986:** Gorbachev’s own dedication to glasnost is tested when the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine explodes and releases radiation over Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Officials fail to protect the people living in those areas or the volunteers who end the fires. While the incident cripples the Soviet economy and is embarrassing for Gorbachev, it further demonstrates how necessary glasnost has become.

**1987-88:** Building on the momentum of glasnost, Gorbachev introduces a series of political and economic reforms he terms **perestroika (reconstruction or rebuilding)**, which is also the title of a book Gorbachev publishes in 1987. Gorbachev talks of moving the economy away from centralized state control and speaks of a “return to history,” asking Russians to confront the past in order to move ahead to the future.

Among the reforms of perestroika: Multiple candidates may run for the same office (though all are Communist Party candidates) and private ownership of businesses is allowed. In the short-term, these revitalization efforts backfire and lead to widespread food shortages. Perestroika soon becomes a vehicle for Soviets to criticize their society. Not only are the current problems (including the economic crisis) examined, but the country’s dark history is also brought to light.

**June 12, 1987:** After abandoning Nixon’s **détente** strategy (a relaxing of tension) in favor of a vigorous anti-communist policy, U.S. president Ronald Reagan implores Gorbachev in a speech at the Brandenburg Gate to “tear down this wall,” as the Berlin Wall was the most visible symbol of the division between East and West.

**1987:** Gorbachev and Reagan sign the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty** to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons in mutually verifiable ways.

**1988:** Gorbachev launches a series of radical reforms designed to loosen the Communist Party’s grip on the government apparatus and to move away from centralized state control. The highest legislative body of the land, the Supreme Soviet, dissolves itself and is replaced by the Congress of People’s Deputies, which allows ordinary people to participate in government for the first time. Families are glued to their television sets to watch the sessions, during which politicians begin to acknowledge publicly what has previously only been whispered in kitchens.

**1988:** Ruslan helps form the punk band NAIV.

**1988:** Borya and Lyuba quit the Komsomol.

**1988:** Olga gets married.

**1989-90:** A series of revolutions sweep across Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, resulting in the collapse of one communist government after another. Hungary declares itself a republic. The Berlin Wall comes down. In Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution ends one-party rule. Poland holds its first semi-free elections since the inception of Communist Party rule in the post-World War II era. The deposition and execution of Romania’s dictator Nicolae Ceausescu quickly follows. Gorbachev’s decision not to defend these communist governments by sending in the Soviet army is a major factor in the political wave that engulfs the region.

**1990:** Olga gives birth to her son, Gosha.

**March 11, 1990:** Lithuania becomes the first of the Soviet Republics to declare independence from the Soviet Union.

**March 15, 1990:** In the country’s first multiparty elections, Gorbachev is elected the first (and only) president of the Soviet Union. He also continues in his role as general secretary of the Communist Party.

**March 30, 1990:** Estonia declares Soviet power illegal.

**May 4, 1990:** Latvia becomes the third Soviet Republic to take a step toward independence when its Supreme Council stipulates the beginning of a transitional period.

**June 12, 1991:** Boris Yeltsin handily defeats Gorbachev’s preferred candidate, Nikolai Ryzhkov, to become the first president of Russia, the largest of the 15 republics in the USSR. The headquarters of the government for the Republic of Russia is the Russian White House — a tall white building near the American Embassy. The seat of government for the USSR is the Kremlin, a few miles away.

**August 19-21, 1991:** With the Baltic Republics openly defiant and strong separatist movements on the rise in Georgia and Ukraine, Gorbachev prepares to sign the New Union Treaty, which would convert the USSR into a more loosely knit group of republics sharing a common president, foreign policy and military, but otherwise autonomous. In order to stop the dissolution of the USSR, a faction of Communist hardliners within the Politburo launches a coup, placing Gorbachev under house arrest.

Lyuba, Boris and Ruslan join the crowd of tens of thousands at the Russian White House. These mass demonstrations, along with lack of support from the army, foil the coup. Gorbachev is returned to his position, but all power resides with Yeltsin.



**August 24, 1991:** Gorbachev resigns as general secretary of the Communist Party. Within a month, all of the Soviet republics except Russia declare their independence.

**November 6, 1991:** The Communist Party is banned in Russia by Yeltsin.

**December 25, 1991:** Gorbachev steps down from his position as president of the Soviet Union. The next day the country officially ceases to exist. Russia, the largest former republic, becomes an independent country, and Yeltsin remains president of Russia for the remainder of the decade. Privatization is encouraged, and wealth becomes concentrated in the hands of the oligarchs. Corruption runs rampant. New television channels are started, and they broadcast voices critical of the government. More Russians travel abroad than ever before.

**1992:** Lyuba joins Borya and starts teaching at School #57.

**1993:** NAIV goes on a whirlwind European tour.

**1995:** Mark Meyerson is born.

**1996:** After a personal tragedy, Olga starts working at a billiard table company,

**December 31, 1999:** Plagued by continuing economic problems, as well as accusations of drunkenness, Yeltsin steps down and puts Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, a former KGB (state security) official, in charge. Elections follow shortly thereafter, formalizing the change. Over the next few years, independent television stations are taken over by government or government-run corporations. Putin is re-elected in 2004 with 71 percent of the vote.

Under Putin, power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the central government.

**2000:** Ruslan quits NAIV. His son, Nikita, is born in October.

**2004:** Ruslan and his second wife break up.

**2006:** Andrei opens his first Café Coton store in Moscow. Within three and a half years, he will have 17 stores in operation across Russia.

**June 2007:** Putin gives a press conference in which he declares that new textbooks will be written for teachers to help inspire a new generation of young Russian patriots. This signals a return to state control of the country's historical narrative.

**2008:** Constitutionally barred from running for a third term, Putin selects Dmitry Medvedev to run for president. With television coverage exclusively promoting Medvedev, and several opposition candidates barred from the

ballot due to "technical violations," Medvedev becomes president of Russia and immediately selects Putin as his prime minister. They rule together, although it is generally acknowledged that Putin has a great deal of control.

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**Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, you can pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.**

**Please encourage people to stay in the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.**

**One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as:**

- **If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask him or her?**
- **What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?**
- **Were you surprised by anything in this film?**
- **Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?**

### TAKING ACTION

- Compare experiences of people in the film with your school district's textbook descriptions of Russia. Work with teachers and school officials to ensure that the information that students receive about Russia is accurate and complete.
- Convene a study group on the history of propaganda, including U.S. and Soviet propaganda used during the Cold War, as well as current examples of propaganda. You might begin your study by looking at the examples available at Russian Archives Online, [www.russianarchives.com/gallery/posters/index.html](http://www.russianarchives.com/gallery/posters/index.html). Consider creating a public display of propaganda art with commentary by members of your study group.
- Conduct oral history interviews with immigrants who lived in the former Soviet Union (including Russia and now independent nations such as Ukraine, Latvia and others) and find ways to share the interviews with your community. Compare the immigrants' recollections with the accounts of the people featured in the film.

### Understanding the Other: Images of the USSR

- List all the things you recall ever hearing about Russia. What messages did you get about what life was/is like there? What were the sources of those messages? Did anything in this film challenge or confirm those messages?
- As you watched the home movie footage, what did you notice about the similarities and differences between your family experience and family experience in Moscow?
- In terms of sources of information, why are the stories of ordinary people often different from news reports, textbooks or official government statements?
- Olga says that, as a child, she didn't have a care in the world, a description that echoes the recollections of others in the film. Given their memories of happy childhoods, how do you think each person in the film would describe the benefits and the drawbacks of life in the old USSR?
- The film ends with footage of a First of September celebration. What does the observance suggest about Russian values related to education? How does that message jibe with the reality of the teachers' lives? How does it compare to school rituals in the United States (or other countries) and the values they convey?
- Olga doesn't regret the democratic changes in post-Soviet Russia, but she also comments that it was a much simpler time when, "Basically, everything was taken care of," meaning housing, employment, health care, pensions and so forth were guaranteed. She says it was less stressful even if the standard of living wasn't as high as it was in the West. What are the benefits and drawbacks of government-provided, guaranteed housing, employment, health care or pensions?
- Andrei shares a story about attempting to join the Communist Party officially. Others talk about belonging to the Komsomol (Communist youth organization). What were their motivations for membership? What role did these institutions play in people's lives? How did they reinforce government power? Can you think of any parallel organizations in the United States?
- Lyuba's mother viewed her future son-in-law through anti-Semitic eyes. Borya says that because his family had a Jewish surname, he and his relatives paid more attention to conformity. Why might such prejudices persist, even in a society that suppressed religious expression or identity?



## Understanding the Other: Images of the United States

- In your view, which character(s) have the best understanding of American life and values? What's your evidence?
- Lyuba says, "When the TV showed shootings and protests over there [in the United States], I would see that and think, 'I am so lucky I live in the Soviet Union!'" How do the media shape our beliefs about other nations? Beliefs about our own nations? In terms of accuracy, does it matter if major media outlets are government controlled, corporate owned or independent? In terms of promoting international understanding, what are the strengths and weaknesses of each of those media models?
- Ruslan rejects "American" values where "everything is measured in money" and "If you earn less than everyone else you are a loser." He suggests that Americans don't value studying history or liberal arts because they need to make money to buy stuff (like jeans and chewing gum). How accurate is Ruslan's view? What evidence would you cite to support or contradict his assessment?
- What is your reaction to Lyuba's recollection that as a child she believed that the struggle for peace meant the struggle against American imperialism, that Americans were the main provocateurs of war and that without them there would be world peace. She says, "Even a hedgehog understood that!" She says that singing for peace was as much a part of her life as going to school or eating dinner. How did her views of the United States as aggressor compare with what you learned about Russia or the USSR? Why do you think she says, "It all sounds like a joke now"?
- In the United States, some historians and political commentators credit Ronald Reagan and his anti-communist policies with toppling the Soviet Union. Do you think the people in the film would agree with that conclusion? Why or why not?

## Living Through Political Transformation

- What is the significance of the title of the film?
- What meaning do you make of the use of the terms conformist/non-conformist rather than, say, patriotic/unpatriotic, government supporter/opponent, or communist/anti-communist? What role does conformity play in creating coherence and stability in society? Under what circumstances does a government have the right to demand conformity

from its citizens and when do demands for conformity go too far?

- In the early years of glasnost, what did openness look like? Which of the new freedoms do you think were the most substantive and why?
- Lyuba says that along with glasnost came the realization that "they had taught us one thing— but the truth was completely different." How are people affected by the discovery that trusted authorities have been hiding the truth about political heroes or cultural icons? How do you think you would react?
- Consider these various departures from the old Soviet ways:
  - Borya and Lyuba participate in street protests and refuse to teach the government's version of history to their students;
  - Ruslan plays punk music criticizing the bourgeoisie;
  - Andrei becomes a business owner.

In what specific ways do these paths threaten or reinforce communist structures? Which is the most radical departure from communism? Who do you think has the most difficulty in adapting to the changes and why?

- Though Ruslan appreciates the expansion of music that glasnost makes available, he is wary of some of the voices that have replaced the old authorities. As people look for new things to believe in, they find a range of "guides" from the predictable (like the church) to dubious psychic healers and outright charlatans. How would you respond to Ruslan's concerns that vulnerable people are making poor choices? Should choices be limited under certain circumstances? If so, in what ways? If not, how might a country like Russia deal with charlatans without imposing the government's point of view?
- Borya observes that he (and Lyuba) found they had less time for politics after they began working as teachers and had a baby. Olga similarly reports being preoccupied with finishing college and caring for her newborn. And Lyuba says that her mother doesn't remember much about ideological fights, because she was too busy "making sure that there was

something to eat" for her children. What role do age and life stages play in participation in political movements? How do generational differences influence people's interpretations of key historical events? What other personal factors influence civic involvement or the willingness to take political risks?



Lyuba remembers being frustrated when a colleague insisted that demonstrators were just drinking and fighting, because while that was true for some demonstrators, it was not true for others, including Lyuba. Who benefits when stories of drinking and fighting are repeated and stories of protestors like Lyuba are left untold? Where do you get reliable information about complex and evolving events such as street protests? What role can disinformation (or one-sided information) play in undermining or supporting political movements?

### Since Perestroika: Living in Post-Soviet Russia

- As history teachers, Lyuba and Borya find themselves caught in the middle of debates over the appropriate role of schools in the development of national pride and providing an accurate picture of history. Putin replaced old textbooks, saying, “We won’t allow outsiders to impose a sense of guilt on us. We need to create a sense of pride among our citizens.” Borya sees the new textbooks as a step backward toward Soviet-style education, where teachers are anti-Western propagandists who justify government actions. Where does your school district draw the line between education and indoctrination? How much time is spent glorifying the nation’s history versus covering its mistakes? And, as Lyuba asks, how do you explain histories that include repression to children? Borya concludes that, though Putin is not the democratic leader they had hoped would follow Yeltsin, Russia is not in danger of returning to its old ways because “with the Internet, it’s impossible to have a monopoly on information, and information means a lot.” Based on your observations, what are the effects of new media technologies on politics, governments, resistance and the exchange of information?
- Olga says that she and her sister have “fallen behind” economically because they are not married. What is the relationship between being single (or a single parent) and economic success? In what ways is the link between economic well-being and marriage different for women than for men?
- How would you describe the characters’ attitudes toward voting? How are their attitudes similar to or different from the attitudes of Americans who do or don’t vote? What types of circumstances and structures prevent people from going to the polls or encourage them to go?
- Olga is surprised by statistics that indicate she is not middle class. She says, “I don’t live in poverty. My life is normal.” How would traditional communists have defined her socioeconomic status? What indicators does she use to determine her economic class? How do you define “middle class”?
- Ruslan observes (with disdain), “Kids today just don’t read.” Olga says that she read a lot because there wasn’t much else to do. And Borya says that when they were young, reading certain books was an act of opposition and that they read, in part, because it was forbidden and therefore exciting. Assuming that Ruslan’s observation is accurate, does the fact that the current generation reads less than their parents’ generation matter? Why or why not?
- Andrei notes that under Soviet rule people didn’t choose their own jobs and he could never have dreamed of owning a business and becoming a successful high-end retailer as he has done. In what ways do political circumstances, culture and personality influence our visions of what is possible?
- Consider these responses to policies in post-Soviet Russia:
  - Everyone fought for a brighter future, but when that future came “it wasn’t quite what we wanted”;
  - “All this political confusion makes the soul feel empty”;
  - The ideals “were profaned and there was nothing left to fight for”;
  - Putin isn’t good, but things are not as bad as before;
  - Nothing has really changed, except Russian citizens have unlimited access to material goods now and they did not in the Soviet era.

What do these responses tell you about the long-term impact of societal changes on the generation that came of age during those changes?



## FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

### MY PERESTROIKA

<http://myperestroika.com/>

Visit the filmmaker's website to learn more about the film, the filmmaker, cast and crew and upcoming screening events.

### Original Online Content on POV Interactive ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

POV's *My Perestroika* companion website  
[www.pbs.org/pov/myperestroika](http://www.pbs.org/pov/myperestroika)

The companion website to **My Perestroika** offers exclusive streaming video clips from the film and a wealth of additional resources, including a Q-and-A with filmmaker Robin Hessman (also available via podcast), ample opportunities for viewers to "talk back" and talk to each other about the film and the following special features:

#### The Last Soviet Generation: Photos From My Perestroika

Check out our slideshow of still images from the film.

#### Propaganda posters from the USSR

Author Abbott Gleason talks about the history of Russian propaganda posters in this audio slideshow.

#### USSR to Perestroika Timeline

Refresh your knowledge of Soviet history with this interactive timeline that also features information on characters from the film.

#### Additional video: Meyerson Family Q-and-A at Brooklyn Museum

POV asks the Meyerson family of **My Perestroika** about their recent visit to New York City.

#### Background & glossary on the USSR

Remember the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics? Or pen pals Yuri Andropov and Samantha Smith? Even if you don't, you'll want to consult our glossary of terms in order to understand terms like glasnost and what the acronym KGB stands for.

#### Quiz: Are you a Cold War Kid?

Test your knowledge of the final decade of the Cold War with our quiz.

#### Live chat with filmmaker on Wednesday, June 29 at 2 PM ET

Filmmaker Robin Hessman will talk with viewers on Wednesday, June 29, 2011.

## What's Your POV?

Share your thoughts about **My Perestroika** by posting a comment on [www.pbs.org/pov/myperestroika](http://www.pbs.org/pov/myperestroika) or send an email to [pbs@pov.org](mailto:pbs@pov.org).

### THE WORLD WIDE WEB VIRTUAL LIBRARY FOR RUSSIAN AND EASTERN EUROPEAN STUDIES.

[www.ucis.pitt.edu/reesweb/](http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/reesweb/)

A resource hosted by the University of Pittsburgh, this portal provides links to a wide variety of information on culture, history, politics, media and scholarship.

### LIBRARY OF ECONOMICS AND LIBERTY. "PERESTROIKA."

[www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Perestroika.html](http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Perestroika.html)

This site, which advocates free markets, includes an article on perestroika by economics professor Marshall I. Goldman.

### LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. "PERESTROIKA."

[www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/pere.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/pere.html)

Documents related to perestroika, including translations of selected Soviet documents, appear on this page of the Library of Congress website.

### SEVENTEEN MOMENTS IN SOVIET HISTORY.

<http://www.soviethistory.org/>

This on-line archive offers a variety of primary source materials, including texts, images, maps, audio and video.

### COMMUNAL LIVING IN RUSSIA: A VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF EVERYDAY SOVIET LIFE.

<http://www.kommunalka.spb.ru/>

This bilingual website describes life in the communal apartments instituted in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution.

### GULAG: MANY DAYS, MANY LIVES.

<http://gulaghistory.org>

The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University runs this website documenting the Soviet Union's large system of forced labor camps.



### **THE HARVARD PROJECT ON THE SOVIET SOCIAL SYSTEM ONLINE.**

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpss>

The website for this project sponsored by Harvard University includes summary transcripts of 705 interviews with refugees who left the USSR during the early years of the Cold War.

### **COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT.**

[http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.home](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.home)

This website provides information about the Cold War and particularly aims to disseminate previously unavailable information.

### **MUSEUM OF POSTERS.**

<http://eng.plakaty.ru>

This bilingual archive site features a large selection of posters that may be searched by creator or subject.

### **FILM-RELATED BOOKS**

***ARMAGEDDON AVERTED: THE SOVIET COLLAPSE, 1970-2000.*** (NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001)

Stephen Kotkin, director of Russian studies at Princeton University, considers why the Soviet elite allowed the USSR to expire quietly rather than defending it militarily.

***EVERYTHING WAS FOREVER UNTIL IT WAS NO MORE: THE LAST SOVIET GENERATION.*** (PRINCETON, N.J.: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006)

Alexei Yurchak examines the transition in Russia.

***LENIN'S TOMB: THE LAST DAYS OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE.*** (NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 1993)

David Remnick chronicles the end of the Soviet Union.

***MOSCOW SPRING.*** (NEW YORK: SUMMIT BOOKS, 1990)

Professors (and couple) William Taubman and Jane Taubman describe their experiences in Russia in 1988.

***PERESTROIKA.*** (NEW YORK: HARPERCOLLINS, 1987)

Mikhail Gorbachev discusses his proposed reforms and the reasoning behind them.

***RESURRECTION: THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW RUSSIA.*** (NEW YORK: VINTAGE, 1998)

David Remnick describes the new regime in Russia.

***RUSSIA AT THE BARRICADES: EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF THE AUGUST 1991 COUP.***

(ARMONK, N.Y.: M.E. SHARPE, 1994)

Victoria E. Bonnell, Ann Cooper and Gregory Freidin edited this collection of accounts of the 1991 coup.

***RUSSIAN TALK: CULTURE AND CONVERSATION DURING PERESTROIKA.*** (ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997)

Anthropologist Nancy Ries discusses Russian speech patterns and national identity.

***STORIES OF THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE: MEMOIRS, DIARIES, DREAMS.*** (ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009)

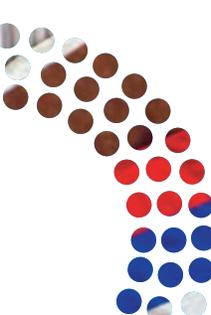
Irina Paperno provides context for and analysis of first-person accounts of life in the Soviet Union.

***UNCIVIL SOCIETY: 1989 AND THE IMPLOSION OF THE COMMUNIST ESTABLISHMENT.*** (NEW YORK: MODERN LIBRARY, 2009)

Princeton University professor Stephen Kotkin looks at the absence of a valid opposition movement in most of the Soviet satellite states and the real reason behind the collapse of the USSR.

***ZHIVAGO'S CHILDREN: THE LAST RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA.*** (CAMBRIDGE: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009).

Vladislav Zubok recalls the behavior of Russian intellectuals in the pre-glasnost era.



## HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order **My Perestroika**, for educational or institutional use please visit New Day Films ([www.newday.com/films/myperestroika.html](http://www.newday.com/films/myperestroika.html)) or call New Day Films toll free at 1 (888) 367-9154



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### POV Digital [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov)

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

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### American Documentary, Inc. [www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org)

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### Join our Community Network! [www.amdoc.org/outreach/events](http://www.amdoc.org/outreach/events)

Learn about new lesson plans, facilitation guides and our other free educational resources and find out about screenings near you. Joining our network is also the first step towards hosting your own POV screening.

You can also follow us on Twitter @POVengage for the latest news from POV Community Engagement & Education.

Front cover: Olga smoking in her kitchen in Moscow  
Photo courtesy of Red Square Productions



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