WHO ARE WE?

We’re not all Russians!

Most of us speak Russian and are from the former-Soviet Union but are not Russians. The USSR was initially established as a union of four Soviet republics, dominated by the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. By 1956, the USSR had grown to contain 15 constituent republics:

- Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic
- Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic
- Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic
- Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Russian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic
- Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic
- Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic
- Uzabek Soviet Socialist Republic

Most of us whom many Americans think of as “Russians” were not even considered Russian until our immigration. Russia was only one of the republics in the USSR, and this name (Russia) was never applied to the nation as a whole. In reality, while most of us now living in the Sacramento region are frequently stereotyped as Russian, only a small percentage of us are ethnically Russian.

It is not surprising that many people think of us as “Russians.” The term “Russification” (or “to be Russified”) describes the USSR’s intent to force cultural assimilation and Russian domination over the other 14 constituent republics. Ostensibly, the purpose of Russification was to unify the republics. These republics were home to many different religious traditions and speaking over 200 dialects and separate languages. With the USSR’s creation, the preferred language became Russian. No matter what our ethnicity or republic of birth, we learned Russian. In addition to the national government, business and education, much local business was also conducted in Russian. That explains why most people from a country formerly part of the USSR speak and/or understand Russian.

Russian-speaking immigrants come from a number of different ethnic, religious and language groups. But …

- ethnically Russian persons could live in the Ukraine all of their lives and would never be considered Ukrainian, and

- a person whose parents were Ukrainian, Uzbek, Armenian, or Jewish could live in Russia and never be considered “Russian.”
We’re not all Slavs!

Though the terms “Slav” and “Slavic” are used broadly, not all people of the ex-Soviet Union are Slavs. Customarily divided into three linguistic groups – East, West and South Slavs – each Slavic group has several ethnic and cultural subdivisions within them, each with a unique history, religion and culture. The main Christian denominations are Russian Orthodox or Roman Catholic; a few are Protestant or Muslim.

East Slavs, traced to Kievan Rus’, include:

- Belarusians
- Russians
- Ukrainians

West Slavs are:

- Czechs
- Poles
- Slovaks

South Slavs are:

- Bosniaks
- Bulgarians
- Croats
- Macedonians
- Montenegrins
- Serbs
- Slovenians

In addition, the USSR contained three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Yet while Latvians and Lithuanians speak Baltic languages, Estonian speak a Finnic language and consider themselves Nordic, not Baltic.

Interestingly, Kievan Rus’ (established 880 A.D.) was the predecessor to what became Belarus, Russia and Ukraine and for many years was more culturally advanced than the rest of Europe! For instance, literacy was common at a time when most of Europe was illiterate. Women had property and inheritance rights hundreds of years before accorded women in most European countries.

Why did we come to Sacramento?

As a result of the reforms of perestroika and glasnost, people who experienced persecution based on their faith were able to leave the USSR. We chose to immigrate to Sacramento. We had learned about Sacramento from two sources. Starting in the early 1970s, a short-wave Evangelical radio program called Word to Russia was broadcast out of West Sacramento to people behind the Iron Curtain. In addition, we read a Russian-language newspaper titled Our Days – the only Russian Christian newspaper in the Western Hemisphere. Published by the Russian Church of Evangelic Christian
Baptists in Bryte (founded in 1928), it was mailed to over 2,000 people worldwide. *Word to Russia* and *Our Days* advertised Sacramento as a place that would welcome us.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s most recent analysis, 10 places in the Sacramento area suburbs had high shares of their foreign born from Eastern Europe:

- North Highlands, 38%
- Fair Oaks, 33%
- Rancho Cordova, 32%
- Citrus Heights, 28%
- Rio Linda, 26%
- West Sacramento, Yolo County, 26%
- Carmichael, 25%
- Arden Arcade, 22%
- Foothill Farms, 21%
- Orangevale, 19%

There are several reasons we settled in those areas. They have, for example, many low-cost residential units (both apartments and houses). In addition, Sacramento’s three major military facilities which lie in these areas were in the process of shrinking and closing during the 1990s. This made nearby places (e.g., Rancho Cordova, North Highlands, and Foothill Farms) both available and affordable to immigrants.

**We’re not all Russian Orthodox!**

Worldwide the majority of Russian-speaking people are of the Russian Orthodox faith, but well over 90 percent of our community in Sacramento is Baptist or Pentecostal; we came as religious refugees. But as you will see from the interactive map of the CIS, the ex-republics of the former USSR are home to many different religions.