

In July 2013, William and Mary students Emilie Clark and Jessica Parks conducted an interview with Natalia Aleksandrovna Alyrzaeva in St. Petersburg, Russia. This interview was conducted as a part of the Russian Movie Theater Project headed by Professor Alexander Prokhorov. The aim of this project is to analyze the moviegoing experiences of typical Russians in both the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia. The interview was transcribed and translated in Spring 2014 by Hannah Kitchen, Jessica Parks, and Mariya Kretova. It is important to note that Natalia Aleksandrovna Alyrzaeva was [previously interviewed](#) in summer 2012 by Andrew Andell and Rachel Faith. The interview questions are exactly the same.

Even though Natalia Alyrzaeva was born and raised in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), she first went to the movies outside of Leningrad. Her family's dacha was located about a hundred kilometers from the city, and so movies were brought in to a local clubhouse instead of shown at a theater. Alyrzaeva recalled watching fairy tale films like [Jack Frost](#), as well as classic Soviet films like [Volga Volga](#). The local clubhouse was an all-purpose gathering place where people would also go to play billiards and read books (4:13). Tickets cost an amazingly low five kopecks for children and fifteen for adults (03:59).

In contrast to the clubhouse in the country, which was surrounded by private homes and a forest, St. Petersburg had many movie theaters. Alyrzaeva describes Vasilevsky Island as having at least two or three movie theaters, called "Pribaltika," "Priboi," and other names she did not remember (05:20). She does not provide many details about the interior of the theaters, describing them as "the most ordinary," but she remembers moviegoing as a pleasant experience. She said the theater was quiet, people were well-behaved, and no one drank beer. She started going to the movies by herself around the age of 14, and said that she and her friends went to the movies quite often. Since the theaters only showed one movie at a time for three or four days, they saw two or maybe three movies per week. Alyrzaeva compared this to modern theaters which show multiple movies at a time. Her and her friends usually went to the daytime or evening screenings.

While she preferred fairy tales in her childhood, Alyrzaeva also grew fond of Soviet movies as an adult. She did not mention American or Western movies as her favorite movies, but rather mentioned classic Russian movies such as [Quiet Flows the Don](#) and [Volga Volga](#). She is also a fan of more classic Russian actors and actresses, such as [Kozakov](#), [Vasilii Lanovoi](#), and [Lyubov Orlova](#). When discussing her favorite Soviet actors she emphasizes their good looks: "they were young...handsome men, simply handsome" (09:54).

Alyrzaeva notes that, when it came to Soviet films, she didn't understand why certain films were prohibited to audiences—she just knew that during the times of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, such films were not allowed to be shown (22:27). This shows that the rules and mysteries of censorship during the Soviet Union were not always clear to ordinary citizens. The government also restricted certain films to people aged sixteen and above. However, Alyrzaeva comments on the fact that,

during Perestroika, films were also shown on tv, thereby greatly expanding the options for movie viewers (25:51). She also mentions that Russian cinema now focuses more on tv serials than films, and that “there are the same actors, and you don’t understand which film you’re watching” so that she is tired of the serials on tv (27:28).

Regarding foreign cinema, Alyrzaeva focuses heavily on the popularity of Indian (Bollywood) films in the Soviet Union. Indian films were some of the only foreign films that the Soviet Union showed in movie theaters, and audiences loved them because of the melodramatic emotion, romance, and vibrant scenes that domestically produced Soviet movies lacked. Alyrzaeva is an example of such a fan, as she repeatedly turns the interview back to how beautiful and emotional Bollywood films are. She also recalls that the lines to see Indian films at the theater were always the longest (sometimes kilometers long (13:41)), and that they were always a big hit with audiences—people would laugh and cry right along with the actors (15:09).

What is interesting to note is that, despite the fact that Alyrzaeva is a long-time moviegoer who could provide detailed commentary on the changes in movie going culture from the Soviet Union to modern Russia, her most detailed and enthusiastic responses are when she is discussing the visual spectacle of her beloved actors and Bollywood films. The rest of her answers are comparatively short and undetailed. This is particularly interesting because Alyrzaeva did not mention Bollywood films at all in her 2012 interview. However, in this interview Alyrzaeva even goes so far as to insist that the interviewers should see one of her favorite Bollywood films, [Awara](#) (15:09). It is evident that, for Alyrzaeva, the visual appeal and pleasant aesthetic of her films is the most important aspect. Aside from commenting on how good-looking her favorite Soviet actors were, she describes her Bollywood films as being full of “beautiful love [and] beautiful clothes” (21:16). She even focuses on the aesthetic of one of her favorite Soviet films, *Volga Volga*: “It’s a beautiful film. Simple, about the kolkhoz workers, about regular work, it was in a simply gorgeous setting” (11:01).

Alyrzaeva concludes her interview by reiterating her philosophy regarding films: “Let there be love and war and tragedies...as long as it’s pleasant and enjoyable to watch” (28:52).