

Summer Work Travel Program, a Foreign Labor Program in Disguise, Is Ripped by a Former Participant

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Is there a State Department cultural exchange program aimed at building good will for the U.S. but that:

- Lacks a cultural element?
- Lacks an exchange feature?
- Results in a major black eye for the U.S. overseas?

The answers to these questions are: yes, yes, and absolutely yes, and the name of the program is the Summer Work Travel program (SWT). It brings cheap summer-time labor to hundreds of U.S. employers, including carnival operators; exploits the young workers (largely from Eastern Europe); and is described in vivid detail in a recently published book, *Russian SWT Roulette: Overview of J-1 Summer Work and Travel program in Russia*.

The author is a Russian who had been a three-time participant in the program. The [e-book is available here](#), while [the book's homepage](#) offers an overview of the findings.

This devastating critique of the program, from a new perspective, is a perfect complement to the work done several years ago by my colleague [Jerry Kammer](#). Kammer, writing from this country, reported in some detail about how the State Department's SWT program is a boon to certain U.S. employers and the middlemen who manage the program; exploits foreign workers, largely from Eastern Europe; and denies American college kids jobs in this country. The workers in the program are granted J-1 visas. The State Department has no field staff either here or in Russia to supervise recruitment or the operation of the SWT program and regards it as one of its "cultural exchange programs".

The emphasis in the new report is on what happens to the young, college-age Russians who participate in the program, rather than the (negative) impacts of the program on comparably aged Americans. These youngsters are lured into the program by unscrupulous Russian agents who lie about the benefits of the program. The workers, who pay an average of something like \$3,000 each to come to the U.S. for four-month-long, ill-paid jobs, are usually housed in grim conditions and do hard physical labor once they arrive.

The recruits seldom have opportunities to taste travel within the States or to have any notable cultural experiences, and often have to take on a second or third job to pay back the \$3,000 in travel and fees. And with many Russian families making \$300 a month, the \$3,000 is a huge investment, pushing the youngsters into working extra jobs. One of the ironies is that many of

the newcomers, according to the author, come hoping to improve their English only to find themselves working alongside a Spanish-speaking labor force. Some of the women wind up working for strip joints and in the sex trade.

The author also points out the irony of the use of the word "exchange" as there is no reciprocation here. There are no young Americans employed in Russia (or anywhere else) in similar programs.

While I was well aware of many of the problems described in *Russian SWT Roulette*, these were new to me:

- No one in either the Russian or U.S. governments supervises (or pays any attention to) the Russian agents and the statements they make and the fees they charge;
- Some of the Russian J-1s become so desperate to earn enough to pay back the fees they have paid that they sell their own blood plasma and their Social Security cards; and
- Unscrupulous U.S. middlemen charge fees to the student-workers while filing phony income tax returns for them; this is unfortunate because they are not entitled to refunds, but get them anyway because their J-1 status is not revealed on the returns.

That the SWT program provides a small portion of the misused Social Security numbers in the U.S. and a loss of tax dollars is a minor worry compared to the big self-imposed wound on this nation's image in Russia. Most of the SWT workers return to Russia angry, according to the author, and let others know that America cheated them. As a result, the number of Russian SWTs has dropped over the years from a peak of 20,000 or so a season to some 4,000 in 2019.

So why should our State Department run a program that *hurts* our image abroad? My sense is that a combination of tradition, astute lobbying on the part of the U.S. middlemen, and the relegation of the program to an obscure part of the Department has created these problems. The bureaucratic distance between the Office of the Secretary of State and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs is immense and the secretary spends more time avoiding nuclear war than worrying about the terms and conditions of employment tolerated by the Bureau.

The report is longer than it needs to be, and somewhat repetitious; it is written in serviceable English but could have used an editor and a dump-truck full of articles ("a", "an", and "the"), which are missing in Russian. It would have been helpful if one could read it on paper, instead of only on Kindle. But it offers a unique and valuable insight on a State Department program that should have been terminated long ago.

Who Is the Author? Who Is Supporting It?

The author uses a *nom de plume*, Prostofilya, which is Russian for simpleton or dupe, an allusion to the naïveté of the SWT workers. He (and I think it is a male) in a reply to an email question from me asking about his name, said that he was a native of Russia, had spent three tours as a SWT worker, and subsequently moved to America, where he became a citizen. The email was not signed.

The book's copyright is owned by Inzerra LLC. If one Googles that name you find a small IT firm in Houston, Texas, which has published a book by Inzerra LLC entitled *Half-American*, which is an autobiography described as follows:

This book is a true success story of the American immigrant: from the half-legal dishwasher all the way up to the manager in the large American corporation. I have seen a lot and I want to share it with the world!

The two books seem to be by the same author. The first name of the author of the SWT travel report may be Mark, as there is a reference to the "lead researcher Mark" in a promotional email message I received from info@comingtoamerika.com pushing the book.

There are references in *Russian SWT Roulette* to America's Gulf Coast. This and the Houston connection suggest that the writer may be living in, or has lived in, Texas. Given the tough statements he makes about the damage done to the youngsters by dastardly Russian agents, and the tolerance they receive from the Russian government, it is no wonder that he does not reveal his name.

The first addressee of the just mentioned promotional email was the Cato Institute's David Bier, who also writes about immigration policy. I have asked Bier in several emails if Cato helped with the writing and/or publishing of the book, and have had no reply. If some force other than the author's own resources helped publish this book, I would rather it be Cato than the other, if unlikely, option: the Russian government.

It does not matter, however, who wrote, supported, or published *Russian SWT Roulette*. It provides highly useful information on an unattractive program, one that appears to hurt the Russian young people involved as well as, importantly, our image in Russia.