

1985 Briefing

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Societal Issues

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Since World War II Soviet society has been one of the most stable and politically quiescent in the world. There are three main reasons for this.

First, the Soviet regime has powerful instruments of control and indoctrination. These include a huge propaganda and censorship apparatus, an educational system that inculcates children with "socialist values," mass organizations like the Young Communist League that serve the same function, and an internal political police force that has vast repressive capabilities and maintains a network of informers in all institutions and enterprises.

Second, for most of the time since Stalin's death in 1953, the regime has provided its citizens with what most of them cherish above all--peace, public order, personal security, and a gradual improvement in the standard of living.

-- The diet has improved considerably and become more varied. Meat

consumption, for example--which most citizens regard as a key indicator of prosperity--increased by about 40 percent in the 1970s.

The quantity and quality of consumer goods improved markedly as well.

-- The system guarantees education, medical care, jobs and pensions for all. However deficient these welfare services may be, many Soviet citizens have derived comfort from the feeling that they do not have to fear the unemployment, periodic depressions, ruthless competition, and prohibitive medical expenses they associate with capitalism.

-- Until recently, the state kept violent crime at a minimum, at least in public places. The population has been led to believe that strong law and order is an inherent advantage of socialism over Western

capitalist countries--which Soviet propagandists portray as violent, degenerate and morally bankrupt societies.

-- Except for the small numbers sent to Afghanistan, the regime has kept Soviet soldiers out of foreign wars--important to a population that lost millions of lives in World War II:

Third, habits and attitudes that are deeply rooted in Russian history make it easier for the regime to maintain social control.

-- The population lacks any tradition of individual rights or political democracy. Identifying Western liberty with social anarchy, and lacking any indigenous democratic heritage, many Soviet citizens perceive no alternative to authoritarian rule. Never having participated in political life, they see the regime as a world apart and are extraordinarily apathetic toward "high politics." Individuality tends to be frowned on and social conformity encouraged.

-- Until recently, Soviet consumers had relatively simple needs. The country has only recently emerged as an urban, industrial society and many city dwellers are only one generation removed from the farm. Never having enjoyed material prosperity, the population has exhibited a high level of endurance for deprivation.

-- Historically induced distrust between different groups in society makes it easier for the regime to use "divide and rule" tactics. A great psychological gulf separates the educated classes from the peasantry. The Russian intelligentsia has traditionally seen the lower classes as a "dark" element, fearing that any "revolt of the masses" would turn into an uncontrollable orgy of destruction. Class divisions have prevented any convergence of worker and intelligentsia dissent.

- The continuing vitality of Russian nationalism is a major asset for the regime. Most Russians oppose any significant increase in autonomy for the non-Russian nationalities who now comprise over half the population. Many fear that any liberalization of internal policy could unleash separatist strivings of the minorities.
- Moreover, many Russians and other Slavs take pride in the USSR's superpower role and in Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe. To a considerable degree, the regime has succeeded in wrapping itself in the flag and conditioning the population to believe that any opposition to the regime plays into the hands of foreign enemies.

Despite these strong forces for social stability, developments over the past decade have weakened several props to the system and given rise to greater public discontent about internal conditions:

- Most importantly, beginning in the mid-1970s the economy began to slow down, leading to a virtual stagnation of consumption growth. Since this came on the heels of rapid advancements in consumer welfare in the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev years, many people had the feeling that their material circumstances were actually deteriorating and that the country was going backward.
- The economic slowdown was accompanied by a shrinking of opportunities for upward social mobility and a hardening of class lines. In the early decades of Soviet rule, rapid industrialization, the Stalin purges, and the manpower losses of World War II had created opportunities for huge numbers of enterprising individuals to vault themselves from one class into another, to rise "from peasant to commissar." Today the time for soaring careers and soaring hopes is past.

-- During the 1970s the population became less isolated from the outside world. With detente there was a modest increase in trade with the West, tourism and emigration grew, and the regime temporarily stopped jamming Western radio broadcasts into the USSR. At the same time, the spread of mass communications brought Finnish television into Estonian homes and Polish television into Ukrainian homes. As the regime's monopoly of information loosened, Soviet citizens were better able to compare their lot with that of peoples enjoying a much higher standard of living, and to gain access to foreign news that enabled them to evaluate regime propaganda more critically.

-- The passage of time has had an effect on the population's outlook.

The regime tries hard to keep memories of World War II alive both as a symbol of national unity and as a reminder of how much life has improved since those days of hardship. But young people increasingly are comparing their situation not with the difficult Soviet past but with contemporary conditions in Eastern Europe and even in the capitalist West. Even many older citizens say that in the absence of a national crisis they are tired of waiting for a tomorrow that never comes.

-- In fact, not many Soviets any longer believe in the Communist "tomorrow." Unfulfilled regime promises (such as the promise in the 1961 Communist Party Program of attaining the world's highest living standard by 1980) have made most citizens extremely cynical about regime propaganda.

[REDACTED] "We hear a lot about how bad things are in the West, but here we have nothing at all." The vision of Communism as a final social goal is "pie in the sky" as far

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as most citizens are concerned.

-- There has been a decline in the level of fear, especially among young people who have no personal memories of the Stalin purges. They are speaking out more freely in criticism of current internal conditions, as are some skilled workers who feel their jobs are secure in a period of labor shortages.

-- As corruption has grown throughout officialdom, the population has increasingly come to resent the privileges of the ruling elite. In some circles a party membership card is derisively called a "meal ticket." The growing awareness of corruption and nepotism even at the highest level--with Brezhnev's son and son-in-law being prime examples--has eroded popular respect for law and authority.

-- The decrepitude of the senior Party leadership in recent years and especially the lack of a vigorous General Secretary have damaged the regime's image and made the Politburo itself the butt of numerous popular jokes.

As a consequence of these developments, the mood of the Soviet population has shifted. The optimism of the 1960s has given way to deep social malaise. Soviet society has become more demanding, less believing and less pliable, as manifested in a variety of related ways:

-- Worker morale has fallen, increasing labor productivity problems.

Many workers think there is little point in exerting themselves since wages are low even for high performers and there is a shortage of quality goods to buy anyway. So they do just enough to keep out of trouble, saying that "they pretend they're paying us and we pretend we're working."

-- The population is becoming increasingly materialistic, infatuated with

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Western goods and fashions, and inclined to denigrate Soviet merchandise. 

- More and more citizens are "dropping out" of public activities and pursuing more rewarding private affairs, such as trafficking on the black market. There is a proliferation of subcultures beyond the regime's purview, such as the hero worship of the Russian singer Vysotsky whose songs implicitly criticized official values and were consequently not recorded during his lifetime.
- The alienation of Soviet youth, the wave of the future, is on the rise. Young people are not only increasingly preoccupied with what the regime denounces as the "cult of things," but some are engaging in various types of deviant and delinquent behavior--drifting, dodging the draft, rejecting marriage, even experimenting with prostitution and Hare Krishna.
- Although crime is not nearly on a level with that in the United States, it is growing significantly and teenage gangs have even made their appearance in some cities. Theft from the state is widespread and is accepted as normal and even legitimate.
- Alcohol abuse, Russia's national pastime and historical plague, has assumed alarming proportions. This "monstrous phenomenon," as the Politburo recently called it, contributes to industrial accidents and crime, and is a major reason that the USSR is the only industrial nation in the world with a declining male life expectancy.
- Religion is attracting increasing numbers of people in all age groups, and there has been a burgeoning of emigration campaigns among

religious and ethnic minorities (Germans, Pentecostals, Greeks, and Armenians as well as Jews).

-- The USSR now has a drug problem, partly due to the exposure of soldiers in Afghanistan to drugs. [REDACTED] Soviet conscripts in Afghanistan reportedly use drugs and some carry their habits back to the USSR.

-- Sporadic labor strikes, nationality demonstrations and protests over food shortages have increased somewhat over the past decade--although the regime has in each instance been able to isolate the unrest and prevent its spread.

Some Soviet leaders may not be fully aware of developments in their own society. Politburo members live, work, travel, eat and vacation in special facilities that insulate them from the population. Gromyko's daughter once said that her father had literally not set foot on the streets of Moscow in thirty years. Even Gorbachev's highly publicized forays into public have probably been carefully staged.

But Russian history has conditioned the leadership to recognize the dangers of ignoring popular attitudes altogether. They are keenly interested in obtaining reliable information about developments in society and have several channels for doing so. [REDACTED] KGB [REDACTED]

Since Brezhnev's waning years, and especially since the onset of unrest in Poland, [REDACTED] increasing leadership concern about the implications of low public morale both for economic performance and for political legitimacy. In Poland many Soviet officials saw a mirror of their own society. They saw that the shortcomings of the regime in Poland (e.g., corruption) bore a striking resemblance to deficiencies in the Soviet

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system, and that some of the conditions that gave rise to social turbulence in Poland were similar in kind (although not in degree) to conditions in the

USSR. Thus, [REDACTED] the

economic and political situation in the USSR was not much better than that in Poland. EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)>10<25Yrs
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Leadership concern about societal problems may also be heightened by a belief that the current US administration is attempting to undermine the USSR internally by appealing to the Soviet population through radio broadcasting and other "subversive" activities, by upping the ante in military spending, and by selective use of economic sanctions. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] widespread concern within the Soviet establishment that the US was trying to bring about a collapse of the Soviet economy EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)>10<25Yrs
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The issue before the Gorbachev leadership is whether a frontal attack on societal problems will prove more disruptive than attempting to maintain the status quo. Brezhnev harshly repressed all overt political dissent, but his basic strategy was to permit the population an expansion of de facto freedom in private activities in exchange for political quiescence. He probably believed that alcohol consumption, the black market, and even religion served as escape valves that diverted popular frustrations into innocuous channels. As one Soviet put it, "better that they be alcoholics than revolutionaries." Brezhnev was probably also afraid that tightening up on discipline too much would run the risk of provoking labor strikes.

By contrast, Gorbachev seems to believe that if too many areas of Soviet life slip beyond direct regime regulation a threat to overall control could develop and that, in any event, the economic costs of societal problems have become unbearable. His speeches convey a tone of urgency about the internal situation and a determination to replace the relatively lax and indulgent

policies of the Brezhnev years with a tightening of discipline across the board--by continuing the campaign against official corruption that Andropov began, by enforcing higher performance standards for workers, by taking stern measures to curtail alcohol consumption.

At the same time, Gorbachev is attempting to improve the regime's public relations by cultivating the image of a leader who is both tougher and more open to the public. He wants to restore public optimism about the future but he also wants to keep popular hopes from getting out of hand. To this end, he is evidently working to reshape the Party Program to make its goals for consumer welfare less ambitious but more credible and realistic.

In the end, whether or not Gorbachev is able to revitalize society will depend in large measure on economic factors and resource allocation decisions. Discipline and image building count for something in shoring up public confidence in the regime, but increased investment in consumer welfare would count for more.

Soviet Consumer Grinning and Bearing It

"If someone breathes on you and has onion on his breath, he is living beyond his means."

"If you knock and they don't answer they are drinking coffee."

Question: "What is 50 meters long and eats cabbage?"

Answer: A line outside a Russian butcher shop."

Question: "Is it possible for a horse to gallop from Leningrad to Moscow?"

Answer: "In theory yes, but in practice no. because the horse would be eaten along the way."

Question: "What was the worst thing about the Tsars?"

Answer: "They left only enough meat to last for 60 years."