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Russ-speak for a sock shortage



'I SEEM to be the only person who has noticed that in the last year or so, Russia is profoundly changed, but because of the curious kind of journalism which appears to be unchanged since 1917, it has gone unremarked, unobserved, unmentioned.'

So a reader, Olga Franklin, wrote to me earlier this year. I was impressed, both by her thesis and by her credentials: she has been reading the Soviet Press attentively for nearly 40 years, and now monitors it for 'Woman's Hour'.

Her argument, essentially, is that the Russian Press is a lot better, and Russian social and economic conditions a lot worse, than you might think from reading the Russian newspapers.

Superficially, this may seem a dubious paradox: if the Press is any good, and the conditions are so bad, surely the Press ought to reflect the conditions? But Olga Franklin's point is that the Press *does* reflect the conditions, if you know how to read it. But to read it, you have to know, not only Russian, but how to decode the peculiar, conventional language of Soviet journalism — what she calls 'Russ-speak'.

Through Russ-speak, information about actual conditions can be conveyed, provided it is well wrapped up in verbiage of a sunny and positive nature. Thus, discussion of a serious bread shortage is not to be done in broad

The Soviet Press, in recent months, has reflected shortages of the following (as well as bread and much else):

Socks. *Lit Gazeta* investigated socklessness and found: 'It was all the fault of ministry civil servants whose job it is to estimate how many pairs of socks a man needs per year, and then to fix the production norms accordingly. The clerks underestimated . . . coming up with the figure that Every Soviet Man needs Six Pairs of Socks per year. The figure should have been *Eight Pairs*. Hence the shortage.'

Household articles. Some towns have kettles and no teacups. Krasnodar . . . had teacups but no saucers. Nobody has any samovars.

Gravestones. Flourishing black market in the red granite used for these. All the shobs want red granite and, having saved enough money to buy a slab, they often park on the grave for weekend picnics, 'just to show off to poorer citizens' (according to *Nedel'ya*).

Communists. The late Yuri Andropov told the Party Central Committee in June of last year, that the No. 1 task of the party is 'to re-educate Soviet youth on Communist lines.' The youth were so hopeless, from a Communist point of view, that the veterans would just have to go on carrying the burden: 'Yes I know, Comrades, we are all past retirement age; several of you are old enough to have broken and worked with our great