

Soviet Reality Sans Potemkin

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A logical but little used methodology for overt observation in the USSR.

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Statements about the size and growth of the Soviet economy in relation to that of the United States have long occupied an important place in intelligence estimates of the USSR's capabilities. So also have statements about the comparative levels of living in the two countries and how they are changing over time. CIA's current estimates are that the Soviet gross national product is somewhat less than half of U.S. GNP and that per capita consumption is about one-third.

Consumption Analysis

In presenting these deceptively neat figures the economic analyst goes on to say that they undoubtedly overstate the relative position of the USSR because the calculations cannot allow adequately for the superior quality of U.S. products and the much greater variety and assortment of products available here. These qualitative factors are particularly important in comparing levels of living in the two countries. For the purpose of this comparison the economic analyst first assembles data on consumer expenditures, product by product, for the United States in dollars and for the USSR in rubles. He must then convert the figures to a

common currency unit by calculating ruble-dollar ratios for these products on the basis of their prices in the two countries. This latter is an extremely difficult and laborious process, for the analyst must try to match the individual products as closely as possible and include as many as he can.

In the latest set of consumption comparisons¹ CIA concluded that with respect to food, clothing, and personal services the allowance made for the quality factor had been more or less adequate. We had equated apples with apples and bread with bread, and we had compared Soviet prices for items of clothing with the prices of the cheapest counterparts in a Sears Roebuck catalogue. We decided that a haircut was a haircut in either country. With respect to consumer durables like refrigerators, radios, and automobiles, however, we concluded that the best matchings we could make still did not take sufficient account of the superior quality and durability of the U.S. product. To make some allowance for this factor we raised the ruble-dollar price ratios for these products by an arbitrary 20 percent. And we said that even this adjustment was probably not enough and that in addition there was no way at all to allow for the much greater variety and assortment of goods available to consumers in the United States; not to mention such extras as paper bags, plastic wrapping, and attractive, well-lighted stores. Besides doing our best to quantify the comparative lot of consumers in the two countries, our estimates also talk about the shoddy goods in Soviet stores, about queues, about the poor quality of personal services to be found everywhere.

From all this I had formed a mental picture of what everyday life for the average Russian was probably like. But I was eager to see for myself, and when the chance to do so finally arose I was determined to do my utmost to check do these preconceptions and acquire the best possible basis for the judgments that I as an economic intelligence analyst must make all the time.

An Attaché Goes Native

The opportunity for a first-hand look was a four-month (June-September 1967) assignment as assistant to the economic counselor in the

American embassy in Moscow. I was given the diplomatic title of Attaché, and the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs was informed that I was a research analyst in CIA on temporary assignment with the Department of State to help out the hard-pressed economics section of the embassy during the summer. My main task was to read the daily press and the economic journals and write dispatches on significant items. Aside from doing a good job for the embassy the principal objective of my TDY was to learn as much as I could about the daily life of the ordinary Russian and obtain some insights into the workings of the Soviet economic system.

I became aware very quickly that extraordinary measures of one kind or another would be needed to accomplish this objective. Going about Moscow in embassy cars, participating in the busy diplomatic social life, and walking the streets in my typically American summer clothes would net me little more than the superficial impressions that a tourist gets. I tried this way of doing things and found it pleasant but unprofitable: going about as someone quite obviously foreign, I got the usual treatment accorded foreigners. People were friendly and polite; they insisted that I go to the head of any line I might be standing in. It was evident that they wanted to make a good impression; they wanted me to see the good side of Soviet society. As much as possible I would be shown Potemkin villages and the people who lived in them.

Clearly, I had to break out of this impasse. I needed to shed my obvious foreignness and "go native." I needed to participate to the maximum in the daily life of Moscow as ostensibly a Soviet citizen, so as to experience and systematically observe the Soviet scene without eliciting the Potemkin-village behavior. But I also had to take care not to do anything that could create a problem for the embassy. I believe that I succeeded in both respects: that is, I created no problems for the embassy, and to a considerable extent I managed to become just one more Moskovite going about his business.

To go native one needs first of all to look and dress more or less like a Russian, or at least someone from one of the other republics. I managed to take on the drab appearance of the average Soviet woman by wearing a tacky outfit consisting of gray-green skirt, nondescript tan blouse, much-worn brown loafers, and of course head scarf. I shed my stockings; Russian women don't wear them in the summer, and American-type nylons are scarcely to be found anywhere. Since I had brought along only one such outfit, I looked more and more "native" as

the weeks passed.

In addition to the appearance of a native, one needs a high degree of fluency in the language. This I had, thanks to several years of visiting the language laboratory and countless hours of practice. In the process I had somehow acquired a Baltic accent, for to my surprise Russians often took me for an Estonian. Finally, going native entails a willingness to do things the hard way, i.e., the Soviet way. Being taken for a foreigner in Moscow is much more pleasant than being taken for an Estonian. Having an embassy car pick one up after the ballet is nothing like fighting one's way onto a Moscow bus!

Attired in my sloppy and deteriorating outfit and equipped with the required language skills plus a willingness to rough it for the sake of learning something, I spent almost all of my free time in Moscoin wandering about the city. I rode subways, buses, trolleys, trams, and suburban commuter trains; I acted the would-be purchaser in dozens of bakeries, gastronoms (grocery stores), food stores, meat stores, fish stores, furniture stores, book stores, department stores, clothing stores, and gift stores. Ditto for collective farm markets and yarmarkas (miniature shopping centers), savings banks and stolovayas ("greasy spoons"). I wandered through parks and railroad stations, visited churches and even the crematory. I walked about the street in all parts of the city at various times of day and evening; I went on city sightseeing tours with Russians. In all these activities I systematically observed the people and their behavior, listened to their conversations, and talked with them as one does in casual, everyday contacts.

To the extent possible I did the same thing in other cities I visited—Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Baku, Vladimir, and Novosibirsk. Except for Novosibirsk, however, I could spend only a day or two in these cities. My conclusions therefore relate for the most part to things I observed in Moscow.

Shopping Pleasures

What are things like for the average urbanite in the USSR? From what I myself experienced I concluded that everyday life is hard and very, very frustrating. One of the worst aspects is the uncertainty about almost

everything. Take the matter of getting your groceries bought. In the first place, you nearly always have to stand in a queue. I stood in scores of them just to find out why the queue was there and what it was like to stand in one. I would listen to the gripes: "What puny little tomatoes! And 40 kopecks a kilogram! My God, how is a person to get along?" "Don't give me that one. Can't you see it's rotten?" "No cabbage, huh? There was some yesterday, why not today?"

These were the complaints at a street stall on October Square near my apartment. There were several such stalls near this square which I inspected almost daily. You never knew whether a given stall would be operating, and you could never be sure what would be for sale. Tomatoes and eggs today, maybe. Tomorrow it might be only green apples. Several times there was a barrel of pickled fish. Once there were plaster statuettes! Another time a truckload of melons was dumped on the sidewalk, and a long line quickly formed to buy them.

Across from the embassy one day a 30-person line formed to buy shoddy-looking black briefcases. In Sokolniki Park I stood for a while in a block-long line of would-be purchasers of nylon shopping bags imported from Yugoslavia and selling for 3 rubles 50 kopecks (about \$4) each. People grumbled about the price but bought the bags anyway. At 2 pm on a Tuesday 18 persons were standing in a line at a counter where sausages were sold; apparently some rarely available delicacy had appeared. Once on a Saturday afternoon I saw a half-block line in front of a small dingy bakery near the Kazan railroad station. Why? Having spent the preceding two hours pushing my way through the mobs in three railroad stations that I wanted to inspect, I was too tired to want to find out. Maybe there were sweet rolls for sale that day: although bread was always available, I once visited five bakeries within walking distance of October Square in search of a sweet roll.

I made it a practice to visit the gastronom near the embassy at different times during the day and on different days of the week. One could never be sure of finding even the most staple of foods there. Frequently there was no fresh meat, and if there was it was pretty poor quality by American standards. Rarely were there any vegetables except tomatoes (in season) and cabbage, and sometimes there were none at all. There was usually a sign "No potatoes." On street cars and trolleys women carrying loaded string bags would greet each other, "Ah, potatoes! Where did you get them? How much did you have to pay?" or "Where did you find that melon?"

On Wednesday about 5:30 I walked into a large gastronom on the Arbat. The place was bedlam-packed with a pushing, shoving crowd of women shoppers, each trying mightily to buy a thing or two. I decided to take on the process of trying to buy tea and a can of fish. I pushed my way through the mob in the dimly lit store in the general direction of the counter where tea was sold. The particular queue for tea was hard to locate in the crowd, but I finally stationed myself at its end after having inadvertently gotten into its middle and been rudely pushed aside and chewed out by the woman in back of me: In due course, I got up to the counter.

The clerk was standing with her back to the customers, talking angrily with a fellow clerk. I waited, and people back of me started grousing. Finally, she turned around and glared at me. I asked does she have a small package of tea and how much is it? "What kind?" I hesitated. "Well, don't you know what you want? Can't you see all these people are waiting? Make up your mind!" I pointed to a stack of boxes of tea, and she said, "All right, 60 kopecks."

But that was only the first queue. Next I had to fight my way through the line for the particular cashier that served the tea department in order to pay 60 kopecks and get a ticket. Then I had to return through the original queue to hand the ticket to the surly clerk and get my tea. Ditto for the purchase of a can of fish. In dire need of a cup of coffee after all this, I made my way to a coffee bar in a far corner, only to find it hopelessly mobbed. It was nearly 7 o'clock as I left the store, physically and nervously exhausted.

In my wanderings in and out of stores of all kinds I was particularly struck by the miniscule amount of variety and assortment in the goods available to Soviet purchasers. Shelves and showcases were usually half empty. Where a woman in the United States or Western Europe can choose from 20 to 30 kinds of shoes in her favorite store, a Soviet woman can choose from perhaps five or six kinds in all the stores selling shoes in Moscow. Although book stores, in contrast, were chuck full of books, opera librettas were not to be found even in music stores, and the Russian classics (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol) were as scarce as hen's teeth. One can do much better for these at Kamkin's in Washington, D. C.

Social Graces

With difficulties and frustrations such as those to put up with every day, one can understand why the Russians treat one another (but not foreigners) so very rudely. If you adhere to our custom of keeping to the right when walking on the sidewalk, you merely get pushed aside and glared at. Subway crowds at rush hours are frequently violent; they shove you hard through the turnstile, race pell mell down the corridors, and push you onto the train with a brute force that I had never experienced even in the crowded subways of New York and London. If you can't keep up with the mob, say just pause to read a directional sign, they start yelling at you.

Similar experiences are to be had on buses, which always seem to be packed to twice their capacity. Once I had been pushed (literally!) onto a bus and pressed against a pole near the door with such force that I could neither stand up straight nor move. The bus stopped. "Are you getting off?" asked a large middle-aged woman near me. No, said I. "You're not! Then why are you here? Can't you see you're in everyone's way? You're blocking the door. Move!" I felt myself become one with the pole as she and others pushed past me and out the door.

And then there is the experience of getting dinner in one of the better Moscow restaurants. (Incidentally, there are fewer than a dozen good ones in this city of six and a half million; the rest are *really* greasy spoons or worse. And one or two of the good ones are frequently closed for repair.) There are always queues in front of the restaurants at dinner hours. The doorkeeper locks the door after letting each diner in, and those left outside bang an the door and shout at him. When we were let in ahead of everyone else, having had the embassy reserve a table, I would always be astonished to see many empty tables.

Just as I had heard, it does nearly always take three hours to get through dinner. The waiters are a seeming eternity between successive operations. Signaling to them will get you nowhere. You can see that they are not busy; they merely lean against the wall and talk to one another. Often there seems to be some kind of argument going on. Once in the hotel restaurant in Tbilisi while waiting to be seated I listened in great embarrassment to the manageress reading the riot act to a waitress. "Why are you sulking? Stop acting like a child. You know it's not *kulturniy* to behave this way in public. If you want to be naughty, do it at

home!" The indifferent attitude of clerks and waiters is not surprising; they have no real incentive to behave otherwise. Their salaries are little above the legal minimum wage (now 60 rubles a month), and the bonus system is such that they can't add much over 5 rubles a month to this no matter what they do. Tipping is rare.

Even getting a little recreation is full of difficulties for the ordinary Russian. One Sunday morning, dressed in my native attire, I went to the park "Exhibitions of the Achievements of the National Economy." The entrance fee is 30 kopecks. The crowd got larger and more vociferous the nearer I got to the gate. What was the problem? I soon found out: only two cashiers' cages were open that day to accommodate the huge crowd. I pushed my way through, trying to locate the end of the queue. There seemed to be several, and people argued loudly about which was first and who was or was not ahead of whom.

Near the cashier's cage stood a man whose job apparently was to supervise the queues and mete out justice. After a half hour of being pushed about and scolded for allegedly crashing some line, I decided I had had it. I pushed ahead and clutched at the sleeve of this supervisor, amid a barrage of verbal abuse from those around. "What are you doing here?" said he. "The queue is over there! This is no way to act." I assumed a helpless and confused air and said in halting Russian, "I am an American. I don't know where the right line is or how things are done here. I only want to get into the park." Presto, in seconds I had bought my ticket and was in!

In Novosibirsk I talked with a young girl, who said to me, "There is so much here that is disgusting. Our papers are always telling us how great things are. Tell me, did you see anything interesting in our stores here in Novosibirsk, anything you wanted to buy?" No, I said. "Of course not! There's nothing here, nothing! Do you know that there are no women's shoes in this city and there haven't been any for a long time? Once in a while some will come in and then there is such a melee as you can't possibly imagine! And the prices! A pair costs 30 rubles, and the things wear out in a few months. Why? And all of us have to work so hard." I myself saw no women's shoes in the stores I visited, and the bareness of the shelves was indeed startling. Of the two so-called department stores in the downtown section of this city of over a million, one was closed for repair, and the one that was open resembled a small store that had just had a close-out sale.

Daily life has a dull sameness. After a while everything seems to look alike and the people seem bored and preoccupied. In Moscow they walk about with a frown. And in Novosibirsk a young psychiatrist said to me, "What have I to look forward to? Only to getting married, maybe, and living out my days in this place. It's so boring!" "Why don't you try to get to Moscow to do research, perhaps?" I say. "To Moscow! Why, that's quite impossible. You have to have connections, and I don't." "But you could work toward it." "No, it's no use, none at all. You just don't understand. Connections mean everything here. "

New Perspective

In summary, I went to the USSR with a set of notions about what to expect that I had formed over the years from reading and research on the Soviet economy. I also had a collection of judgment factors, partly intuitive and partly derived from this same research and reading, that I applied in drawing conclusions and speculating about probable future developments in the Soviet economy. My four months of living in the country itself, however, greatly altered these preconceptions and modified the implicit judgment factors in many respects. No amount of reading about the Soviet economy in Washington could substitute for the summer in Moscow as I spent it.

As a result of this experience I think that our measurements of the position of Soviet consumers in relation to those of the United States (and Western Europe) favor the USSR to a much greater extent than I had thought. The ruble-dollar ratios are far too low for most consumer goods. Cabbages are not cabbages in both countries. The cotton dress worn by the average Soviet woman is not equivalent to the cheapest one in a Sears catalogue; the latter is of better quality and more stylish. The arbitrary 20 percent adjustment that was made in some of the ratios is clearly too little. The difference in variety and assortment of goods available in the two countries is enormous—far greater than I had thought. Queues and spot shortages were far more in evidence than I expected. Shoddy goods were shoddier. And I obtained a totally new impression of the behavior of ordinary Soviet people toward one another.

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