
BACKGROUND BOOKS

SOVIET LIFE, 1985

Westerners' attempts to understand life in the Soviet Union have always been hampered by shortages of reliable information, a secretive political system, and a history and culture that present a tangle of Western and Oriental influences.

Enigma number one, writes Oxford's Ronald Hingley, is **The Russian Mind** (Scribner's, 1977). Ivan the Terrible, the great 16th-century tsar, was imperious enough to order the slaughter of an elephant that failed to bow to him, yet too superstitious to order the arrest of a "lunatic naked monk" who wandered the countryside denouncing him as "a limb of Satan."

Today's Russians, says Hingley, share Ivan's propensity to do "everything in excess" and his radically contradictory traits: "Broad, yet narrow; reckless, yet cautious; tolerant, yet censorious; freedom-loving, yet slavish; independent, docile, tough, malleable, kind, cruel."

Extremes are characteristic of the Russian past, judging by Nicholas V. Riasanovsky's scholarly **History of Russia** (Oxford, 1963; 4th ed., 1984). A Berkeley historian, he begins his chronicle with the creation of the first Russian state during the ninth century. Noting that "the Bolsheviks won control of a backward agrarian country and transformed it into the second greatest industrial power in the world," Riasanovsky argues that the Soviet Union is still, in many respects, a developing nation.

Twentieth Century Russia (Houghton, 1960; 5th ed., 1981) is Donald W. Treadgold's comprehensive volume on recent developments, from the fall of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917 to the last years of Leonid Brezhnev's reign.

Inequality is a key feature of the

new "classless" society. One handy indicator, sociologist David Lane writes in his survey of **Soviet Economy and Society** (N.Y. Univ., 1985), is the number of medals awarded. During the first 23 years of Communist rule, when egalitarianism was still strong, only 1,900 citizens were singled out for praise (and perquisites) as Heroes of Labor, Honored Artists, and the like. Between 1946 and 1957, however, Moscow handed out 196,600 such decorations.

Soviet researchers themselves have identified four elements of "social stratification." They see class divisions between urban workers and collective farmers (13 percent of the population), as well as distinctions between urban and rural folk, between blue- and white-collar workers, and between people with different skills and incomes in various occupations.

In the Soviet Union (as elsewhere), Lane notes, this translates into social and economic inequality. In the pecking order of the collective farm, for example, the agricultural expert stands above the tractor operator, who overshadows the field laborer.

A more exhaustive study of inequality is Mervyn Matthews's **Class and Society in Soviet Russia** (Walker, 1972).

In **The Contemporary Soviet City**, edited by Henry W. Morton and Robert C. Stuart (Sharpe, 1984), Richard Dobson, a Soviet analyst at the United States Information Agency, notes that the Soviet school system is one of the chief means by which inequality is perpetuated. The schools provide "all youngsters with free access to any type of education that they may wish to pursue." The catch is that at the best schools there are only a limited number of openings,

and favoritism is not unknown.

Yet, Dobson adds, Moscow does deliver on its promise of education for the masses. It introduced universal 10-year secondary education during the 1970s (although the legal minimum is eight years), and it claims a literacy rate of 99 percent.

About 20 percent of Soviet high school students go on to some kind of college, reports University of Birmingham researcher John Dunstan in *Paths to Excellence and the Soviet School* (NFER, 1978, cloth & paper).

Journalist Susan Jacoby sees some similarities between Soviet schooling and her own education in American parochial schools. "Both were deeply concerned with perpetuating an ideology as well as transmitting knowledge," she writes in *Inside Soviet Schools* (Hill & Wang, 1974, cloth; Schocken, 1975, paper). "Both were more interested in obtaining 'right' answers than questioning minds; both set strict standards of conduct for their students; both adopted certain authoritarian tactics in the classroom, at least partly because of severe overcrowding."

Jacoby adds some interesting qualifications and found some schools to which she would have been happy to send her own children. She also discovered genuine policy differences among educators. And while, on paper, the Soviet curriculum seems more advanced, Soviet and American students receive roughly comparable schooling.

Outside the schools, children enjoy a kind of privileged existence. Coddled, overdressed, hugged, and pampered at every opportunity, Soviet kids live in a fantasy world of parental indulgence. Detsky Mir (Children's World), a huge toy store in downtown Moscow, is a kind of Eveschild's F. A. O. Schwarz, a haven of

plastic and glitter and rapturous delight that epitomizes the Soviets' sentimental view of childhood.

Yet, notes *New York Times* man David K. Shipler in his dour survey of Russian life, *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* (Times Books, 1983, cloth; 1984, paper), even children's toys contain bitter lessons. Cheaply made, they quickly break. "They teach something about the child's powerlessness over his world . . . promoting . . . later contentment within an adult system that is also physically deprived."

Comparing **Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.** (Russell Sage Foundation, 1970, cloth; Touchstone, 1972), Cornell psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner finds much to recommend the latter. As he and his wife discovered, child-rearing is very much a collective business: "When our youngsters . . . would run about the [park] paths, kindly citizens of all ages would bring them back by the hand, often with a reproachful word about our lack of proper concern for our children's welfare."

Bronfenbrenner finds that while Soviet children are more conformist than their American peers, they are also much less prone to "anti-social behavior." One reason: Parents and other adults enjoy much more authority over children, peer groups much less, than in the United States.

Children may enjoy a somewhat privileged existence, but their mothers bear a double burden.

Marxist theory calls for equality of the sexes (albeit somewhat ambiguously), and the Soviet constitution forbids gender discrimination, notes Berkeley's Gail Warshofsky Lapidus in *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (Univ. of Calif., 1978, cloth; 1979, pa-

per). But the realities of Soviet life largely rob such promises of meaning.

Women suffer most from the Soviet economy's failings. About 85 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 55 work. They have little choice: A second paycheck is a must for most families. Yet women are often relegated to low-status, low-paying jobs. They earn roughly 70 percent as much as men. At home, they are still expected to fill the traditional roles of wife and mother. That means cooking meals, standing in line to shop daily (prepared and frozen foods are scarce), and handling household chores without dishwashers and other modern appliances. Day-care centers accommodate only 37 percent of preschool children.

Yet feminism does not have much of a following in the Soviet Union. "The inspiration and the theoretical rationale" for a reassessment of women's roles, Lapidus concludes, will have to come from the West.

William M. Mandel's view of **Soviet Women** (Anchor/Doubleday, 1975) is much more optimistic. He notes, among other things, that "sexploitation" is absent from movies and magazines.

One of the great compensations of Russian life is the special intensity and warmth of friendships and family life. In a curious way, observes

émigré sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh, these are also "subversive" relationships. In **Love, Marriage, and Friendship in the Soviet Union** (Praeger, 1984), he writes that "connections" are indispensable in obtaining many of life's necessities—clothes, food, jobs. One minor example: Soviet people know by heart the sizes of all their friends and will buy them shoes or shirts if a shipment should arrive suddenly at a local store.

Andrea Lee's **Russian Journal** (Random, 1979, cloth; 1984, paper) provides an intimate first-person account of Russia. During her 10 months in Moscow with her student-husband, she attended drunken all-night parties, listened to unprovoked emotional confessions, and visited country dachas.

Pressed by a Russian friend to defend what he considered Americans' materialism and shallow friendships, she said that she found her Russian acquaintances at least as obsessed with money and possessions as were her American friends.

"Oh no," he responded. "In a capitalist society, you can't help but think about money—to the detriment of friendship. We Russians are poorer. Our lives are Spartan, and because of that, we have more time to consider things of the heart."

—Bradford P. Johnson

EDITOR'S NOTE: Bradford P. Johnson, a Washington attorney, is Senior Associate of the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies.