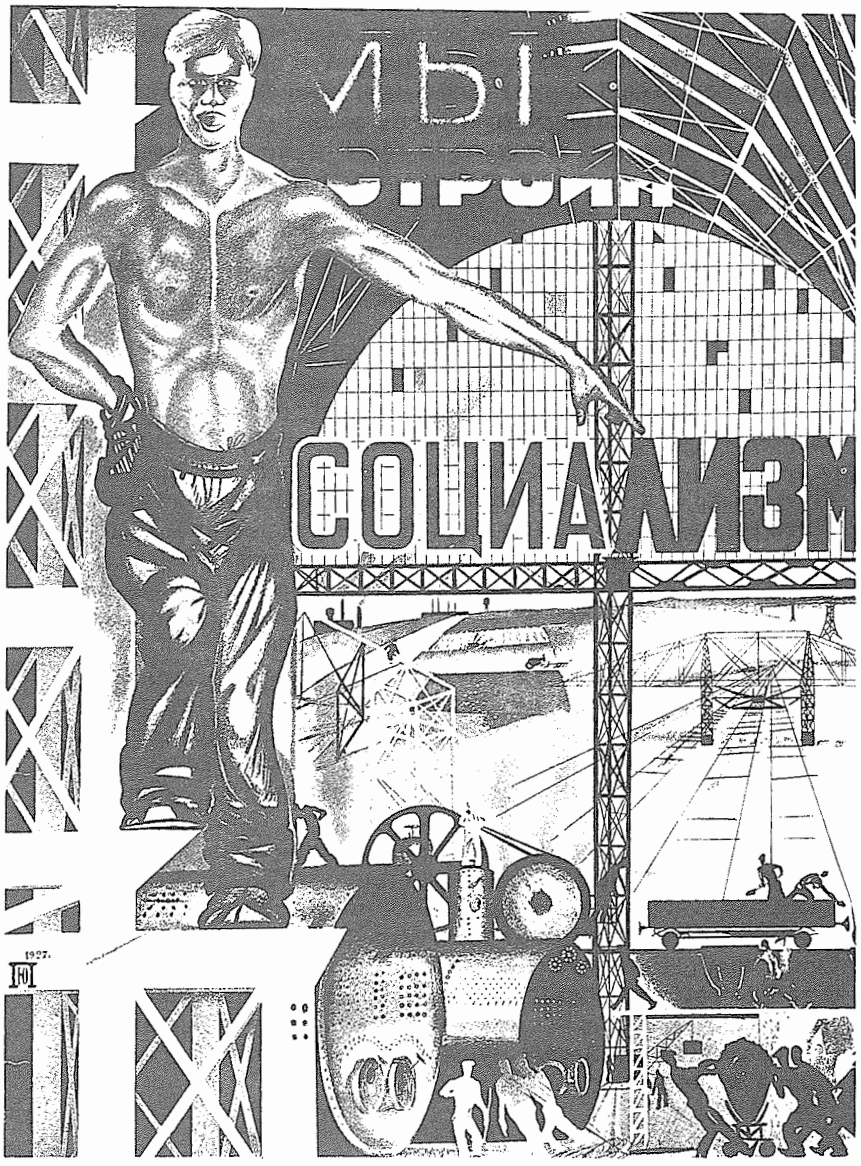


Used by permission of Ästhetik und Kommunikation, Berlin.

"We are building socialism," proclaims this worker, drawn by Y. Pimenov in the early 1930s to promote the First Five-Year Plan. Such art is characteristic of a peculiarly persistent Soviet genre, the "production poster."

The Soviet Future

Most public American discussion of the Soviet Union focuses on its foreign policy and military capabilities. Among the specialists, another, quieter debate is underway. The subject: looming economic and social crises inside the USSR. Here, two Soviet affairs specialists—demographer Murray Feshbach and political scientist Blair Ruble—argue less about the nature of those problems than about their significance. Feshbach contends that during the next two decades the Kremlin must undertake drastic actions to cope with unprecedented change. Ruble contends that the Soviet system will "muddle through" without much basic alteration. Finally, critic John Glad supplies a portrait of everyday life in the USSR with selections from recent Russian fiction.

A DIFFERENT CRISIS

by Murray Feshbach

During the next two decades, the Soviet Union will face special problems that have never before afflicted a major industrialized nation during peacetime. Simply stated, the European part of the population is not replacing itself, while the non-Russian, non-Slavic, non-European people of the Soviet Union—most of whom are of Muslim origin—are experiencing a strong growth in numbers. By the year 2000, ethnic Russians will be a clear minority in the country that most Americans still call "Russia."

From this simple fact flow consequences that may, over the next two decades, lead the Soviet Union into peculiar economic, military, and political difficulties.

The USSR's annual rate of economic growth now stands at a low 2 percent; shortages of skilled labor caused by the slowdown in the ethnic Russian rate of increase could trim that to zero or even induce a decline. Barring some unforeseen change in the Kremlin's world view, the Soviet military will continue to require hundreds of thousands of conscripts each year through the 1980s and '90s—but in 15 years, the Red Army may well find itself with large numbers of soldiers who turn toward Mecca at sunset. In short, between now and the end of the century, the ethnic Russian primacy long taken for granted by both tsars and Bolsheviks will be challenged—not by individuals but by inescapable demographic trends.

Single Sex Cities

The Soviet Union, of course, will have other headaches in the years ahead. The question of who will succeed Leonid Brezhnev, for instance, looms larger with each passing day. The Soviet economy is beset by low worker morale, a leveling-off of oil production, sluggish technological progress, and the drain of massive military spending. To Soviet leaders, such ailments are painful, chronic, and familiar, like arthritis. The coming demographic shift is an altogether different type of crisis, one unprecedented in Soviet history.

The demographic shift will magnify the effects of a general demographic *slump*. Overall, death rates are up, and birth rates are down. Since 1964, the Soviet death rate has jumped by 40 percent; by the end of the century, it is expected to hit 10.6 annually per 1,000 population, nearly the same rate as China's is now. Meanwhile, the national birth rate has fallen by 30 percent since 1950; two decades from now, the rate likely will be down to 16.1 per 1,000. Labor is already short, and the available supply will tighten further over the next few years as the annual net increase in the size of the working-age population sags from its 1976 high of 2.7 million to a projected 1986 low of 285,000. For a variety of reasons, the 1980s should also bring a long-term

Murray Feshbach, 51, wrote this essay while he was a Wilson Center Fellow on leave from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, where he is chief of the USSR Population, Employment, and Research and Development branch. Born in New York City, he received his B.A. from Syracuse University (1950), an M.A. in diplomatic history from Columbia (1951), and a Ph.D. in Soviet economics from American University (1974). He is the author of Demography in Soviet Society *(forthcoming). The views expressed in this essay are not necessarily those of the U.S. Bureau of the Census.*

THE USSR: POLITICAL AND ETHNIC DIVISIONS

Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Names of Soviet republics are in capital letters.

In 1980, out of a total Soviet population of 265 million, the eight southern republics accounted for 57 million, and the RSFSR, 138 million. Like most Central Asians, Turkic peoples are traditionally Muslim.

decline in Soviet capital formation—just when more investment in machinery will be needed to help offset labor shortages by boosting productivity.

How did the Soviet Union get caught in this bind?

The past is partly to blame. Stalin's purges of the 1930s took many millions of lives. Battlefield losses during World War II claimed another 15 million Soviet *males* alone. The Soviet Union is still feeling the "demographic echo" of both events. To policymakers in the Kremlin, the phrase "generation gap" has a special gruesome reality.

But the continuing climb in the Soviet death rate indicates that whatever the other problems of the past were, many of them are still around. Indeed, during the last few years the mortality rate for 20- to 44-year-olds has shot up so fast that male life expectancy has dropped from 66 to 63 years, a full decade

less than the life span for females. (The only nation with a larger gap is Gabon.) The chief villain here is, in two words, rampant alcoholism. Among its well-known effects are ill health, malnutrition, and accidental death.

Short-sighted government planning has played a part, creating scores of "single sex cities" across the Soviet Union. Many an undiversified metropolis such as Bratsk and Abakan was built around a "hot, heavy, and hazardous" industry (e.g., steel, coal, oil-drilling) with almost no jobs for females. Men are correspondingly scarce in textile towns, including Orekhovo-Zuevo and Ivanova, known in the USSR as the "cities of brides."

Soviet babies are also dying in shockingly large numbers. During the past decade, the USSR became the first industrialized nation to experience a long-term rise in infant mortality, which grew, according to the Soviet definition, from 22.9 per 1,000 live births in 1971 to 31.1 per 1,000 in 1976. (The Soviets consider infant losses within a week of delivery as miscarriages, not deaths. If calculated by American methods, the 1976 figure would be 35.6 per 1,000, more than twice the U.S. rate.)

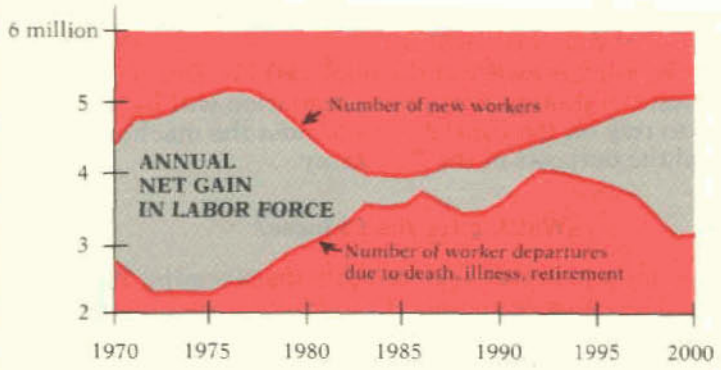
One reason for the rise in infant mortality is that abortion has apparently become the USSR's principal means of "contraception," with a present average of six abortions per woman per lifetime, 12 times the U.S. rate. When used repeatedly, abortion may induce premature delivery in subsequent pregnancies, and premature infants are 25 times more likely to die during their first year than full-term infants. Another baby-killer is female alcoholism, which weakens the fetus.

40 Million Muslims . . .

But the prime culprit may well be the USSR's prenatal and postnatal health-care system, in which the flaws of Soviet medicine and social planning seem to converge. Fed inferior artificial milk, placed in overcrowded day-care centers when only three months old (owing in part to the labor shortage, most Soviet women must work full-time), and left there for 8 to 12 hours a day, hundreds of thousands of Soviet babies have become easy prey to epidemic diseases, particularly influenza.

The labor shortage and its economic implications would, by themselves, be enough to worry the Kremlin. Yet the problem is worsened by regional differences: It is the USSR's Russians and other Slavs who are not producing as many children as they once did. Soviet Central Asians, by contrast, are flourishing. Relatively unaffected both by Stalin's purges and World War II, traditionally shunning both alcohol and abortion, and keeping

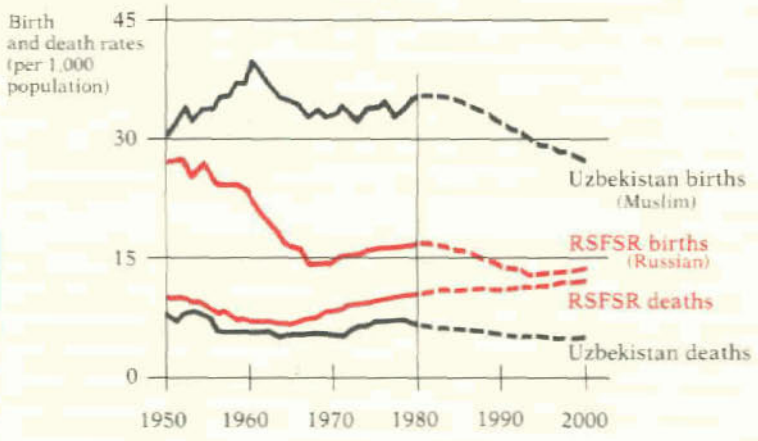
THE SOVIET LABOR "SQUEEZE"



Source: Murray Feshbach.

Declining from a 1976 peak of 5.2 million, the number of 16-year-olds annually entering the Soviet labor force will hit a low of 3.9 million in 1985. Departures add to the squeeze: Soviet workers will retire or die in increasingly high numbers until 1993. Below, a comparison of vital statistics. In Uzbekistan, births have so exceeded deaths that the population of the republic (figured as a proportion of the Soviet total) will more than double between 1950 and 2000, from 3.5 to 8.6 percent.

ETHNIC RUSSIAN AND MUSLIM TRENDS: 1950–2000



Source: Murray Feshbach.

their birth rate high even as their death rate declines, the Soviet Union's 40 million ethnic Muslims have enjoyed a rate of population increase about five times that of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

Every Russian is aware of the implications: During the next two decades, the waning European population will increasingly be forced to rely on the rural Asians to man the machines of industry and the outposts of the Red Army.

Waiting for the Chinese?

This is not a prospect that delights the Kremlin. Relations between ethnic Russians and their Muslim neighbors have never been smooth. It was the Russian Bolsheviks who, in 1920 and 1921, used the Red Army to put the old tsarist empire back together. In 1924, partly in reaction to Muslim guerrilla groups (the *Basmachi*), the Bolshevik regime divided the vast Central Asian region of Turkestan into five "nations." Kazakhstan, the largest, stretches more than 1,500 miles from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border. The others—Kirghizistan, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—lie in the arid southeastern corner of the Soviet Union, where they nestle up against China, Afghanistan, and Iran.

After a half-century of Communist rule, Central Asian resentment of the European "elder brothers" still flares up: In 1969, Uzbeks rioted in their capital of Tashkent, beating up all those who looked Russian. On the other side, Europeans living in the southeastern republics seem almost colonial in their habit of deriding the natives as *chernye*—that is, "blacks" (which they are not). While Brezhnev has proclaimed the Red Army "the living embodiment of Socialist internationalism," its senior command remains exclusively Slav, and mainly Russian.

Small wonder, then, that the Muslims of the borderlands reportedly taunt the Russians with the warning: "Wait until the Chinese come."

The Chinese may never come, but the year 2000 will, and it might bring a Muslim "victory in the bedroom." At century's end, the population of the Central Asian republics will have grown by one-half, from 40 to 60 million. These five republics, populated mainly by ethnic Turks sharing a common religion and culture, will then account for more than 20 percent of the entire Soviet population. If one adds the three Transcaucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, then the turn-of-the-century total for the "Soviet sunbelt" climbs to almost 30 percent. In 1970, only 1 out of 7 persons in the Soviet Union was

The USSR's ethnic groups range from Eskimo to German. In 1977, more than 40 languages of instruction were used in Soviet schools; in 1979, the Soviet census counted 22 "nationalities" with populations of more than a million. Here, in a 1957 poster, representatives of five such groups are shown beneath the hammer-and-sickle symbol of the Soviet state.

of Muslim origin. By the turn of the century, the ratio will be at least 1 out of 5, and perhaps 1 out of 4. Of the Soviet population as a whole, ethnic Russians will be a minority—48 percent.

While high Muslim fertility seems, at first glance, a partial solution to the USSR's overall manpower shortage, in fact it merely adds a cruel twist. As a practical matter, the Soviet leadership cannot simply replace each Russian worker with a Muslim. There is the problem of location: 60 percent of the Soviet gross industrial product originates in the RSFSR, and to this day Soviet Muslims are reluctant to emigrate from the "House of Islam" *(Dar ul-Islam)*, their native lands far to the southeast.

There are, of course, Soviet precedents for the coerced movement of large populations. In 1944, for example, six days after the liberation of the Crimea from the Nazis, all 200,000 of the local Tatars were condemned by Stalin as a "collaborator nation" and sent to Siberia, the Urals, and Uzbekistan. But slave labor is anachronistic in a technological world; it is better suited to the building of earthen dams than to the manufacture of silicon semiconductors.

The alternative is even more unwieldy: shifting the Soviet Union's industrial plant to the labor-rich southern tier. Again, there are precedents, as when, in 1942–43, up to 50 percent of

European Russia's factories were moved east from the combat zone to the safer Urals. But heavy postwar industrialization in European Russia has now made such an exodus prohibitively expensive. It would probably be vetoed on political grounds anyway, for fear of a Russian "backlash." Housing and food are already scarcer in the RSFSR than in Central Asia, and ethnic Russians would be less than happy to see their industries and resources siphoned off by people they consider inferior ingrates.*

Hence the government's present compromise: Whenever possible, it locates *new* plants for labor-intensive industries in the south, a move that recognizes the improbability of Muslim migration. This may help in the long term, but it will do little to dampen the labor squeeze coming in the 1980s.

Coping with Demography

The manpower problem will be exacerbated by the demands of the armed forces. If the Communist Party is the father of Soviet society, the military is its privileged eldest son. Come labor shortage or labor surplus, the Kremlin annually calls up about 1.7 million 18-year-olds to replenish the 4.8-million-man armed forces. But if it takes its usual quota, the Army will conscript enough manpower in 1986 to equal six times that year's net increase in the labor force.

This smaller pool will also include a higher percentage of the country's least educated, least "urban" menfolk. In 1970, only one-fifth of all Soviet conscripts came from the eight southern republics; in the year 2000, the proportion will be one-third. The Red Army's truck driver training course now takes a year. (The U.S. Army's takes five weeks.) One wonders what place the sophisticated technological army of the 21st century will have for unskilled and (perhaps) untrustworthy draftees from the "backward" border regions, many of them probably still unable to speak Russian fluently.†

The USSR has, in its short history, been hit by epidemics, invasions, and famines, all of them staggering blows that might have toppled the regime—but didn't. The Soviet people seem able to endure and survive almost any misfortune. But the USSR has never experienced simultaneous blows to both eco-

*A rather blunt 1971 dissident *samizdat* document complained that "Russia gets all the knocks" and warned that the regime's ideal of a "new Soviet people" would lead, through "random hybridization," to the "biological degeneration" of the Russian people. In Soviet demographic circles, the current euphemism for Russian "ethnic purity" is "*kachestvo* [quality] of the population."

†In 1970, only 16 percent of Central Asians of all ages claimed fluency in Russian.

nomic health and ethnic Russian supremacy.

Some Western analysts predict that life will simply grind on, that present birth and death trends will continue but that the Soviet Union will plod on without much change. Others see the Kremlin turning away from its domestic difficulties and embarking upon risky foreign adventures to divert the citizenry's attention and stir patriotic fervor.

Such forecasts, in my view, are plausible but improbable.

The Soviet Union will not be able to simply do "more of the same" during the crises of the 1980s and '90s as it did in the past. The Communist Party's goal is to retain power. To do so, it will probably be forced to increase production by implementing fundamental economic reforms, to loosen the state bureaucracy's strangle hold on the everyday workings of the economy, even to the point of permitting some autonomy for shopkeepers, farmers, and cottage industries, as in Poland or Yugoslavia.

Should such reforms succeed (and there is no guarantee of that), the USSR's ethnic Russian leaders will be able to deal with the growing numbers of Central Asians from a position of renewed strength, which will make economic and political concessions to the Muslims seem less dangerous.

Continued economic decline, conversely, might lead to an anti-Muslim crackdown by an insecure and embattled party. And the Muslims themselves might get ideas about autonomy. Nothing breeds solidarity so much as repression; as historian Alexandre Bennigsen has noted, the USSR is the only place in the world where Shiite and Sunni Muslims, often bitter foes elsewhere, regularly take part in the same religious rites.

But these are only scenarios, dim visions of what might possibly happen in the years to come. This peculiar problem of *people* introduces a new element of uncertainty. The demographic trends now underway will in the next few decades challenge the regime in ways that simply cannot be foreseen. In discussions by American analysts of the Soviet Union's future—discussions that address, say, the USSR's bigger missiles, growing Navy, and poor economic performance —the coming population shift seems amorphous, distant, almost inconceivable. But it could easily become the Kremlin's most pressing problem of all. For better or worse, it will reshape the Soviet Union, producing a country that in the year 2000 will be far different from the one we know today.