

Soviet Life, 1985

Why is the Soviet system, with so many problems, as stable as it is? Princeton University's Stephen F. Cohen argues that the Kremlin has provided most Soviet citizens with security, national pride, and modest "improvements in each succeeding generation's way of life." Other Sovietologists contend that, thanks to the regime's success in repressing dissent, blocking foreign influence, and curbing travel abroad, most Soviet citizens do not know what they are missing. The Kremlin's "command economy" gives the military ample weaponry and thus buttresses Soviet claims to superpower status; otherwise, the system simply muddles along. In some ways, the average Russian industrial worker fares no better today than his American counterpart did 50 years ago. Here, three scholars present their findings on the Soviet "quality of life." Sociologist Mark G. Field examines health care; political scientist Henry W. Morton surveys urban housing; and sociologist Mervyn Matthews describes the experience of the sizable Soviet underclass.

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

by Mark G. Field

"Either the louse defeats socialism," Vladimir I. Lenin warned in 1919, "or socialism defeats the louse."

As Lenin spoke, the parasite was spreading a deadly typhus epidemic throughout the Soviet Union. Ultimately, of course, Soviet-style socialism won the battle, but not before some three million lives were lost. Other infectious diseases, such as smallpox, relapsing fever, and even plague, claimed an additional five to seven million lives between 1916 and 1924.

Today, deadly infectious diseases are no longer a serious problem for the Soviets. As in the West, heart disease and cancer now rank as the leading causes of death. The Soviet Union provides free medical care to each and every one of its citizens, and it claims more than double the number of hospital beds per 10,000 people (115) and nearly twice as many doctors (some 850,000) as the United States. (And Soviet doctors still make house calls.) Moscow, Leningrad, and a few other major cities boast large medical research institutes. Americans and other foreigners sometimes travel to Soviet hospitals for special medical treatments. About 50 U.S. citizens have visited the Helmholtz Institute of Ophthalmology, which has pioneered treatment of retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary disease that usually leads to blindness.

By the early 1970s, however, there were signs that something had gone awry. Moscow simply stopped publishing some kinds of medical data—presumably to avoid embarrassment. In fact, Murray Feshbach, a Georgetown University demographer, has shown that the 1970s dealt the Soviet Union unprecedented reversals in some vital health indicators. Alone among the world's industrialized nations, it experienced a rise in infant mortality. Indeed, death rates are up for all age groups. A Soviet male born in 1966 could expect to live 66 years; by 1979, male life expectancy at birth had dropped to 62, below that of Costa Rica (66.3), Syria (63.8), and Yugoslavia (65.4).

Not Enough Ammunition

Such setbacks probably reflect growing Soviet social problems more than they do defects in Soviet doctors or hospitals. Alcoholism, a diet high in cholesterol, and hypertension (a product of overcrowding and poor living conditions in Russian cities) contribute to heart disease. Poor diets increase the risk of cancer. Frequent abortions among Soviet women can lead to later complications during childbirth.

Yet the Soviet health care system is clearly in trouble. Between 1955 and 1977, the share of the Soviet gross national

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