
manage to supplement their income by dabbling in the illegal "second," or "black," economy: Petty bureaucrats solicit bribes; delivery men haul freight on the side; doctors, plumbers, and house painters make undeclared house calls. Having control over fewer commodities or services, poor families evidently reap fewer rewards from any illegal activities, perhaps 20 to 25 rubles a month.

Those Soviet citizens who, by hook or by crook, cannot make ends meet may turn to the state for support. Pensions are normally paid to men over 60, women over 55, and to those who are disabled, widowed, or have lost their principal means of support. (Others eligible for some state assistance include some eight million single-parent households.) In 1981, the Soviet Union dispensed 35.4 billion rubles in pension payments of various kinds. Divided among the country's 50.2 million recipients, that worked out, in crude terms, to only 58.8 rubles a month—below the 66.6 ruble per capita poverty threshold. (In addition, the minimum monthly pension for peasants was set at a mere 28 rubles.) Many elderly citizens take jobs after reaching retirement, a trend strongly encouraged by the authorities. Others survive by pooling resources with their children.

Three Decades Behind

Such conditions mock the 1961 Communist Party Program's expansive prediction that, by 1980, the Soviet Union would boast "the highest living standards in the world." Indeed, the survey that my colleagues and I have conducted among Soviet émigrés suggests that members of the Soviet "underclass" live under significantly worse conditions than their Western counterparts. Sponsored by the U.S. National Council for Soviet and East European Research, this work drew on the responses of 348 families, all of whom left the USSR after 1977. They were chosen on the basis of their income per capita (below 70 rubles) and asked not only to describe their living accommodations but also how their lives compared with those of other Soviet citizens.

The past three decades have seen impressive gains in the *overall* Soviet standard of living. Since 1950, real consumption per capita has risen at an average annual rate of 3.4 percent—equivalent to a tripling of the goods and services purchased by the average Soviet citizen.

Yet as economist Gertrude Schroeder points out, "Soviet living standards remain drab and essentially primitive by Western standards and also compare unfavorably with much of Eastern

Europe." Even those statistics that the Soviet authorities are proud enough to publish show a big lag. In 1981, some 65 percent of all Soviet households had refrigerators, against over 90 percent in the United States, 85 percent in Spain, and 80 percent in Poland. Only 55 percent had washing machines, versus 74 percent in the United States, 90 percent in Italy, and 80 percent in Yugoslavia. If the living standards of the average Soviet citizen trail two or three decades behind those of the average U.S. resident, those of the Soviet poor are certainly even less advanced.

No Fruit, No Lettuce

Nowhere is this truth more evident than in their diet. Food ranks as the most important consumer commodity of the poor, taking up over 60 percent of the income of families in the émigré sample. The diet they reported was in many respects way below the norms stipulated by the idealized 1967 Sarkisyan-Kuznetsova budget. In general terms, the Soviet poor today eat as well as the average Soviet citizen did some 15 years ago. But the average Soviet citizen still consumes far less meat, fruit, and vegetable oil and vastly more bread, potatoes, and milk than his American counterpart.*

Those émigrés whom we interviewed reported that they had bought very few vegetables other than the most common, such as cabbage, beets, onions, and carrots. During the winter, 60 percent purchased no fruit and 25 percent no lettuce or other salad vegetables. One-third rarely, if ever, ate imported oranges, lemons, and bananas, or cakes and other confectionaries.

Lack of income was not the only problem. Excluded from the network of restricted stores used by the more influential and affluent, the poor had to purchase much of their food at state enterprises, where long queues all too often lead to nothing but neat, empty shelves. The collective markets run by peasant farmers offer a more reliable supply of market produce, but the prices are usually at least double those of the state shops.

Surprisingly, 28 percent of those interviewed termed their diet "satisfactory"; another 10 percent had no particular opinion, which amounted to the same reaction. Most likely, their answers reflected perennially low expectations or an ignorance of what might be bought under more plentiful conditions.

*In 1980, for example, Soviet consumption per capita of beef (11 kilograms) stood below not only that of the United States (46.9 kg.) but also below that of Poland (18.5 kg.) and Yugoslavia (14.8 kg.). To judge from data published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Americans who lived in households earning from \$6,000 to \$10,000 in 1977—when the poverty threshold was \$6,191—annually consumed 30 percent more meat and fish, 45 percent more fruit, and roughly the same amount of vegetables as those interviewed in the émigré survey.