

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.

A beggar on the streets of Kazan, capital of Tatar. Strict vagrancy laws normally keep indigents—usually alcoholics or invalids—off the streets.



Feelings about the supply of clothing, however, were much less benign. Sixty-seven percent declared that clothing was an “acute problem,” and another 30 percent called it a “problem.” Almost daily, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* feature articles or letters lamenting the quality and quantity of Soviet clothing; in February 1985, Soviet Premier Konstantin Chernenko devoted much of a Politburo speech to discussing a chronic shortage of footwear. The “poverty” wardrobe detailed by Sarkisyan and Kuznetsova contained, for some reason, a relatively lavish assortment of garments. The husband, for example, was assumed to have a winter coat, a light coat and mackintosh, two suits, working clothes, a “half coat,” two pairs of trousers, seven pairs of socks, shirts, linen, and hats. Shoes, oddly enough, were omitted.

In their wisdom, Sarkisyan and Kuznetsova allotted 43 rubles per month to cover clothing costs. But clothing, at least in Moscow, is relatively expensive. In 1982, a T-shirt cost \$4.17 (versus \$1.79 in Washington, D.C.); a pair of men’s socks, \$3.45 (versus \$2.50); a men’s raincoat, \$121.70 (versus \$69.95). By our estimates, the Sarkisyan-Kuznetsova wardrobe—including shoes—would have cost a minimum of 1,100 rubles per person, which at 43 rubles per head would mean the equivalent of eight

and a half years' wear on every item.

After food and clothing, housing ranks as the greatest expense facing the poor. Sarkisyan and Kuznetsova budgeted five percent of family income for shelter. The results of our sample suggest that, in reality, the poor spend far more. While the average rent in state-supplied housing was indeed quite low (about nine rubles a month), payments for rent, electricity, gas, telephone, heating, cleaning, and repairs together ran at 20 rubles, or nine percent of family income.

Tight control of urban development and private construction has retarded the formation of outwardly "poor" neighborhoods. But standardized housing at nominal rents, public amenities, and the absence of commercial interests all serve to mask, rather than remove, social inequality. When asked whether richer people in Soviet society had *better quality* accommodations, 90 percent of the respondents considered that was indeed so. The poor were thought to have less of the influence needed—through membership in the Communist Party, deputyships in the local soviet, trade union posts, and so on—to quicken their progress through housing waiting lists, or to find larger apartments.

To what degree do the poorest people in the Soviet Union feel themselves to be a group apart? Only about two percent of the sample admitted to being "very poor" and 21 percent to being "poor" at all. About 13 percent thought that they were not poor, while the remainder, or nearly two-thirds, had no clear conception. (The monthly median income per capita of these families was a mere 59 rubles.) When asked whether they regarded "the urban poor" as a separate group in Soviet society, only one-quarter of the sample replied that they did.

Waiting for Better Days

Perhaps the Soviet poor are in some ways inured to hardship because they feel that such conditions are shared by all fellow citizens. About 90 percent of the respondents believed that poverty was widespread—estimates varied from 25 percent to 80 percent of the population. Meanwhile, no less than 99 percent thought that the average wage in Soviet society was considerably lower than the officially published figure. As Robert Kaiser observed in *Russia* (1976), "There appears to be no embarrassment or sense of inadequacy in a Russian family when parents and children dress in the same shapeless clothes, [or] when the two-room flat is not equipped with an upholstered sofa or colorful curtains."