Travels in Russia

A Journey Through The Former Soviet Union provides a grim picture of what the triumph of capital has created in the 'new' Russia

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These impressions of a three-month trip attempt to answer certain questions which emerge from news reports in Western media. But they remain generalizations and are obviously subject to criticism. In view of the immensity of Russia and the short length of our stay, these impressions cannot be accurate for all parts of Russia.

Our visit was essentially to four cities: St. Petersburg, Moscow, Voronezh and Archangel and to the part of the Karelia region between Onega Lake and the White Sea.

The first general impression is that the weakness of the central government causes areas of the country to differ from one another. These differences are visible even during a short stay. The country can be characterized-economically, socially and politically-as "regional feudalism." Differences between St. Petersburg, Moscow and Voronzh are striking. I will discuss the North separately as it can't be compared with other places we visited

The former communist bureaucracy is still very much in evidence but it functions very differently from city to city. In St. Petersburg, no one cared that my visa was not stamped on time. When I attempted to register at the St. Petersburg police station, I was ejected, somewhat roughly. But my "irregular" status did not matter and the youth hostel where we stayed made no objection.

In Moscow, it was completely different. It was impossible to get a room at the youth hostel when a visa was not in order. We spent an entire day from early morning to late at night, going back and forth between the central office and the local police station. At the end of the day, after paying some kind of a bribe in addition to the fine, we finally got the needed stamp on our passports. Only then could we look for a room. Outside of Moscow, we were rarely asked for our papers.

Freedom for ordinary people differed greatly depending on the city. In St. Petersburg, a Russian friend told us, "Here we are more free than in a big city in the West, In a certain way it was true. At the subway entrance in Nevski Prospect, the central thoroughfare in the heart of St. Petersburg, we saw groups of people selling their political literature and having discussions with passersby. Their affiliations were openly displayed, among them anarchists with a black flag.

Anything Better Than Communists

A huge housing project in the center of the city has been squatted for years. Here there are numerous artistic activities. like exhibitions and courtyard rock concerts.

We might ask what freedom means when people have no money to buy basic necessities. But most inhabitants consider it more important than anything else to carry on activities they choose without worrying about possible repression. (This was the explanation given for the pro-Yeltsin, anti-Zuganov vote in the 1996 election: anything is better than the return of the communists.) We should point out that this freedom does not imply personal risk. Except for a district near the Warsaw train station, which is reputed to be the place where the St. Petersburg underworld hangs out, no one advises you to "be careful."

Moscow was completely different. We weren't there long enough to get an idea of the level of freedom, but we were warned about the danger not only of being mugged, but of being attacked by gangs of skinheads hunting "foreigners" (who could be from outside the country or from the south of Russia.) Physical characteristics and an accent can give one away, so we were told not to talk in the streets after a certain hour in the evening.

While visiting a friend in a Moscow suburb, we saw at an intersection next to a kiosk a sort of shrine-a photograph nailed to a tree surrounded by a lot of flowers. These were placed there in memory of the kiosk keeper who had been killed by the local mafia because he refused to pay protection money. Our friend told us this in a lowered voice while looking around to see if anyone was listening to us talking about the mafia. He advised us not to take pictures of this shrine.

Another day, we observed an incident involving men who looked like Russian mafiosi carrying a man, either dead or completely drunk, and we were advised not to stay around. Outside the youth hostel where we stayed, there was a huge market area filled with a mixture of some very unpleasant people. Several times, as we returned in the evenings, we were rather frightened by some young people looking at, and following us with an insistence that made us feel uneasy. We also saw fights taking place amid a general indifference of the crowd.

Voronezh was completely different from both these cities. When we asked our friend if he would be able to distribute leaflets or papers publicly, he immediately answered, "No, it would be too dangerous. Perhaps at a big demonstration, but not just anywhere."

In Voronezh, everything was very quiet. We walked around the city by ourselves at all times of day, but no one advised us to be careful. When we asked why an apartment building entrance had a security code to open the outside gate, we were told it was installed after the tenants protested that drunkards gathered on the stairs, drinking and eating.

Although I was never in Russia during the Breshnev regime, I think most provincial cities of this period must have been like Voronezh: life under a leaden lid. A money shortage may be one reason, but St. Petersburg was certainly poorer and yet it was as lively as Voronzh was dead.

Local Oligarchy Now Rules City

According to a friend who lives in Voronezh, the city is dominated by thirty former members of the nomenklatura who have managed to buy all the principal factories of this industrial city. They accomplished this by using the privatization system to cheat the workers. They obtained money from local banks to buy vouchers distributed to the workers. This local oligarchy now rules the city, maintaining the former laws and the former bureaucratic organization. It determines the level of repression needed to maintain the status quo.

It is not true that the situation in Russia is "chaotic." A lot of the public services function—-though poorly. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, the subways, tramways and buses ran on schedule. The same was true for trains; they go slowly because of bad track conditions, but are more or less on time; full but never overcrowded. (Sometimes it is hard to get a ticket.) The train stations are usually huge buildings like empty shells with lonely people, tramps and waiting passengers.

Airports are more chaotic. Scheduled flights are canceled, and some terminals are so overcrowded it is easy to miss your flight. Train service linking airports to the city is in terrible shape. The poor reputation of the domestic airlines was confirmed when we saw our fellow passengers crossing themselves before the plane took off.

We never experienced electrical shutdowns as we did in China. These observations about transportation are limited to the big cities, but indicate a certain level of organization and maintenance, as well as a supply of electricity and fuel.

A Functioning Economy?

Only in St. Petersburg and in the North did we have the opportunity to observe economic activity. Most factories in the St. Petersburg suburbs are empty and abandoned. Some are so covered with rust and weeds that it was surprising to see smoke rising from a chimney or trucks going through the gates. (It occurred to us that this could be clandestine activity.)

The port in St. Petersburg was not busy' and not very modern (use of containers seemed limited). The trucks we saw were old model American Studebakers from WW II. Junked trucks were seen at the sides of the roads and in inactive factory yards.

How Can People Survive?

In the North, the desolation was even worse and very depressing. The port of Archangel was barely operating and on the other side of the White Sea, a former military port in Kem was so decrepit that it was hard to imagine any previous activity. The only industrial activity we observed was a sawmill for wood exports. The military observation tower was empty. Since one-third of the Soviet economy was devoted to the military, it is hard to determine the kind of non-military activity that used to go on here.

Before attempting to answer the basic question, "How can people survive in such economic conditions?" I want to report some observations about life in various places we visited.

St. Petersburg gives the impression of uniform poverty, not only its roads, buildings, courtyards, parks and playgrounds are decrepit, but judging by the stairways and common areas, housing complexes seem to be too. Even the beautiful classical buildings in the center city exhibit the same lack of maintenance. A dull, poverty-stricken monotony hangs over the city, especially on overcast days.

The dilapidation is particularly noticeable when it rains and you must avoid pools of water from gutters all over the pavement. Building maintenance seems non-existent. The dirt and smell were evidence of terrible poverty. We never saw so many stray cats as in St. Petersburg, most of them living wild in the buildings' common areas.

There was a striking contrast between the dirt outside and the level of comfort inside the apartments (leaving aside the shared kitchens and bathrooms). Despite lack of maintenance and funds, most people achieved a certain level of comfort in their living quarters.

People on the street exhibited a similar lack of maintenance. It seemed to us that most of them didn't have enough money to be concerned about wearing clothes that matched or to display any elegance. Judging by the number of stalls selling second-hand clothing, people wear clothes until they are completely worn out. The central part of Moscow was different. New buildings are going up and the "nouveaux riches" can afford stylish clothes and new suburban dachas.

Lack of Collective Life

In the North, things are even worse than in St. Petersburg. In Archangel, and especially in Kem, most of the population is housed in old, large, wooden houses. The dirt roads are in terrible shape and there are raised wooden sidewalks built to avoid puddles.

By contrast, Voronezh looked quite clean and well maintained which contrasted with the lack of collective life. In Voronezh, as in the North, there were few cars, but traffic was quite heavy in Moscow (you often see expensive foreign cars) and St. Petersburg (old cars in poor condition).

As agricultural workers are now free to go where they please, many have left the farms, not wanting to take the land for themselves. This made it easy for former managers of the collective farms as well as the state farms (kolkhozes or sovkhoses) to become owners of the land. But besides the labor shortage, fuel, machinery and parts are severely lacking. Russian agriculture has long lacked speedy transport and storage facilities. At present, the most prosperous farms are in the vicinity of the big cities because they can arrange to provision the local market. Many urban people have a family member with agricultural connections and this link goes far in explaining how agricultural products reach consumers.

Implosion of the Soviet System

One need not stay a long time in Russia to discover that survival depends on finding a source for money. Any expediency to acquire money works. What expediency you find depends on your place in this class society, where you are situated and what possibilities your skills and training offer. The underground economy that evolved from this dependence on unofficial exchanges had a lot to do with the implosion of the soviet system.

Workers are considered workers whether they work full or part time or not at all. But working or not, they are all in a similar situation because wages are often not paid, or paid after a long delay. In some places, people are paid with wages in kind-either with some of the goods they have produced or with goods exchanged for these products.

A Russian friend told us it is common to see stalls next to main roads where pots, clothing, etc. are sold; this is how workers get their wages. Payment like this can be made only when the factory's product and location permit it. Workers in a steel factory or coal mine or at a saw mill near a forest have no opportunity to sell "their" product. This explains why strikes for wages occur in the mines and in remote parts of Russia.

As far as we can tell from our contacts, the level of wages for ordinary people is between 200,000 and 500,000 rubles a month. This is a pittance considering that a subway token or a public phone call costs 1200 rubles in St. Petersburg and 1400 in Moscow (24 and 26 cents).

One reason workers are able to survive in this chaos and don't resort to strikes, demonstrations or riots, is because the previous system taught them to cheat and use expediency in a parallel economy to survive.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, sidewalks next to subway entrances are lined by scores of people-generally elderly women- selling small quantities of everything, always ready to hide it in their bag or under their coat.

While traveling on a small secondary railway line in the North, we saw quite a few poachers going to fish at night in ponds where expensive fish are cultivated for the underground market. Judging by the items we saw on the streets, smuggling must be widespread. There is an enormous supply of Chinese and Western goods. Peasants (or someone connected with agricultural activity) often sell small quantities of local garden products.

From these visible underground activities and the relationships they imply, we can surmise what the larger economy is like. The main economic activities are now in the hands of the former nomenklatura. The nouveaux riches do not emerge from any connection to basic industry. Their sphere is rather in some kind of trade or banking—i.e., from trading goods produced in or outside of Russia, or illegal exports like weapons, radioactive material, etc.

In the West, there is a lot of talk about the "mafia" in Russia. People immediately think of the Italian Mafia and its connections all over the world. I am skeptical there is such a link to Russia. At presents several mafias can be found in Russia, all with completely different functions, origins and roles. Their existence and strength could be a consequence of the weakness of the central government or the growing influence of criminal activity in Russia could have directly weakened the central government.

We have to remember that, before perestroika, all economic, social and political relations were managed through the Party dictatorship and its subsidiary organizations. Although this society had written laws, it was not governed by them. The party was theoretically the center of the whole system.

In economic matters, the official plan was all-important and was implemented through links in the party bureaucracy. Horizontal links existed, but were not "legal" and they partially undermined the whole system. Laws pertaining to the horizontal links were unwritten-barter, fair play and mutual confidence determined them. Infractions of these non-written rules were settled, if possible, through the repressive organizations of the system.

The collapse of the entire party organization now makes such a balance between legal and illegal activities impossible to maintain. Thus, we see a kind of wild capitalism where conflicts of interest and/ or lack of fair play in contractual economic relations are settled as in a war with threats, blackmail, protection rackets and killings.

Rather than lacking a central authority with deputies at a local level, this system lacks capitalist regulation to rid itself of these overtly violent relations. Instead we find a mafia at all levels of economic activity, rarely with connections between them. This situation allows people who have some economic and/or financial power to become richer as they are able to impose their own law. The situation will change once some individuals or clans are able to impose their influence and goods on the others.

A visitor to Russia finds it difficult to determine the level of international capital's penetration in the country. Superficial evidence there is: MacDonald's, widespread tobacco advertising, a French firm renovating the Ermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, foreign phone companies competing for intercity or international business, processed junk food and small trinkets sold everywhere; foreign cars (mainly in Moscow).

Russian Democracy

We were there during the second round of the recent elections and there was general disinterest in them: This game doesn't bother us, but anything is better than a return of "communism." Thus, in St. Petersburg-the traditional rebellious city, the majority (of about half of the population allowed to vote) voted for Yeltsin. They had no confidence in Yeltsin, but he was opposing the "communist" candidate Zuganov. Political propaganda for Yeltsin clearly exploited this sentiment. Posters contrasted dull and dangerous "communism" to the bright future associated with Western "civilization."

A comrade in Moscow gave us his views on the fall of Gorbachev and the rise of Yeltsin. He attributed the implosion of the state capitalist system in the USSR to the impossibility of extracting enough surplus value from the workers. Another less politicized friend in St. Petersburg expressed the same opinion more directly and crudely saying, "The Russian people have always been lazy and the workers do not want to work."

The ruling class was very conscious of this problem and tried to find a remedy:

Gorbachev was the right man for the job. In order to improve productivity, he tried to completely change the guidelines for work norms in most factories. Drunkenness was a major reason for poor productivity so he tried to control the sale of vodka and clamp down on drunkenness. Immediately, strikes broke out all over the USSR. These strikes were not political (as reported in the West), but defensive economic strikes which were exploited by the Yeltsin clan to remove Gorbachev in order to gain power themselves.

Then, it was their turn to deal with the same problem, but now it was even more difficult. In order to undermine Gorbachev completely, it had been necessary to dismantle the remnants of power still retained by the Party (which was not too difficult as it was already rotten from within). Increasing productivity was left "to the market," which means direct competition between Russian enterprises and foreign goods. Poverty was seen as the main lever to make workers work harder for less pay. This drive failed as production had been seriously disrupted and the workers didn't "adapt" because they continued to depend on the usual expediencies.

Throughout Russia, but especially in St. Petersburg and the North, the number of drunkards and the quantity of cheap vodka available is astounding. Workers in remote areas like Siberia have the worst situation in the country: Workers from all over Russia went to work in distant factories and mines expecting high wages, but perestroika trapped them there and the extreme inflation reduced their savings to zero.

Current wages are barely enough to live on so they lack the money for plane fare, and now they are stuck. For these trapped workers, freedom has meant permanent deportation even if not in the form of the earlier concentration camps. Economic chains rather than political ones hold them there.

The necessity to concentrate on survival takes its toll on people's quality of life. Acquiring money to get food and other necessities takes an enormous effort, so little time or money is left for entertainment. If they have enough money, people visit each other or watch TV. We were told that before the fall of the soviet system, there were many illegal circles which met to have discussions and listen to literature and music, but that most such groups have disappeared (except in St. Petersburg where people still gather to listen to amateur poets, but mainly to drink vodka, even if they are ill fed).

Health care is certainly less available after the collapse of the Soviet state. The health and education systems were previously linked to the workplace or residence; many no longer function. In a brief period, the average age of death has fallen ten years, more for men (most definitely because of alcoholism) than for women.

In St. Petersburg where we associated with many young people, the results of hunger and poor food were very noticeable. The individual we contacted in Voronezh worked in a center for disabled children where the institution could afford to have a doctor come only twice a year.

The Soviet system's laws devoted to the emancipation of women were generally perceived as progressive ones. Perhaps a woman's situation doesn't differ all that much from her situation in pre-Soviet days. It is clear, however, that the current situation creates additional hardships for women's shoulders. What was touted as liberation has been turned into an instrument of male domination. The fact that abortions are free means it is often used as a means of contraception. Men don't want to use condoms and female contraceptives are either too expensive or unavailable. Easy divorce means that many women must live alone with their children, but without money since it is easy for a man to abandon them. The present conditions make it easy for men to escape familial obligations. Equality on the job translates into the hardest jobs being given to women who, in a sense, can be considered the immigrant workers in Russia. These observations were confirmed repeatedly by the general attitude of men toward women.

Our contacts with politicized people were interesting. Most have been influenced by Western ideologies, but it is difficult to label their current perspectives. They reject "communism" as an ideology which has inseparable links with Stalinism. Also, the immensity of Russia and transportation problems make personal contacts or even exchange of literature difficult. In discussions with some of these political friends we had the feeling they were almost totally ignorant of most of what has happened in the USSR during the past century. We felt it would be useful to try to explain briefly what we know of the history and some analysis beyond the Leninist or Trotskyist interpretations of the Russian revolution.

In St. Petersburg, we were struck by the fact that many people would talk of the repression of the past decade. People under 40 spoke of problems they faced when involved with underground literature, painting, or rock music, but were completely silent on what went on during and since the 1917 revolution, as if an entire 80 years was obliterated. Lenin was the only image we saw of a past or present Communist leader.

About the Photographs

Grim Lenin still stands in front of a factory in the Russian Ural Mountain town of Nizhny-Tagil. Striking Detroit News photographer Rebecca Cook accompanied a free-lance writer there in 1991 as a guest of local environmentalists to chronicle the damage done by Soviet industrialism. Formerly off-limits to foreigners, the town was surrounded by prison camps whose inmates built the cheerless living quarters and factories which operated without any pollution controls.

Simon's and Claudia's visits give life to the contentions in the essay "The Fall of Communism; The Triumph of Capital" (FE #339, Spring 1992). We recommend it as a companion piece to these first-hand observations.

All Russia Photographs: Rebecca Cook

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"Russian Women: Life In The Former Soviet Union After the Fall," FE #349, Summer 1997.

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