

THE CASUALTIES OF A DIZZYING CHANGE

by Observer

Stagnation of the Soviet economy was due to bureaucratic/command type of government and bureaucratic/command type of management. So said Mikhail Gorbachev. And he advocated perestroika (reforms) and glasnost (openness) His reforms were intended to bring about a socialist democracy.

In the ensuing political upheavals, communist rule was overthrown. The reforms instituted, in the years of transition, a capitalist democracy. The change has been devastating.

"Beyond their bafflement" says Kevin Fedarko (Time 22 August 1994) "the strongest emotion of ordinary Muscovites is probably fear of crime. Mafia-like gangs have transformed a city that in Soviet days was one of the safest in the world into a virtual criminopolis. There has also been a rash of previously unheard-of crimes, such as contract killings -- about 100 in 1993 -- and bombing assassinations, which the cops call "good-morning murders" because for some reason the devices are usually triggered around dawn." "In my 17 years on patrol," says police lieutenant Gennadi Groshikov, "I have never seen anything as vicious."

HEDONISM

Side by side with the poverty, squalor and crime are the mercenaries, racketeers and musclemen with their appetite for ostentation and excess. 'These are the conspicuous consumers', Fedarko says, 'who patronize the Mercedes and Volvo dealerships, pamper themselves with Estee Lauder "exclusive skin-care consultations" and plunk down the equivalent of an average workers's

monthly pay for French champagne at the glided-mirror Yeliseyevsky Gastronom, the Grande dame of Moscow supermarkets.

Unlike the members of the old Soviet elite, who led quiet, if profoundly hypocritical lives of sequestered privilege while paying lip service to the Marxist egalitarianism, the *noviye bogatiye* seem determined to part with their newfound wealth in the most ostentatious manner possible. *"Russians who come to me want to spend their money and want it to show," says Mats Lofgren, a Swedish furniture dealer. "They won't waste their time on functional furniture. I show them the gold-plated faucets and ornate lamps, and they take them. I had a Russian come in recently who announced, "My friend just spend \$50,000 doing his apartment, and I want the same. Only make it \$60,000."*

In the past, such opulence was accessible to ordinary Muscovites only in Moscow's finest municipal enterprise: the metro. Built by Stalin in the 1930s and filled with grand mosaics of heroic peasants and labourers, frosted chandeliers and stained glass archways, the subway, sumptuous and muscular all at one, offered a magnificent expression of Soviet omnipotence: construction of the first 14 stations alone ate up more marble than all the courts built by the Romanovs during their 300 years on the throne. Now even the metro is changing for the worse. For the millions who ride the trains each day, it no longer provides an enchanted voyage: stations are crowded with beggars, drunks and an army of small-time entrepreneurs who have turned the subterranean passageways into 24-hour-a-day shopping malls."

The metro was not only magnificent. A ride was practically for nothing. For five kopecs (cents) one could have travelled anywhere in the vast network of sprawling Moscow.

VULNERABILITY

“Aboveground, pedestrians encounter squalor as gritty and raw as the pirozhki, or meat pies sold by sidewalk vendors. In the crowded waiting room at Kursley station, one of the city’s seediest, a teenage gypsy girl stood screaming not long ago as blood spurted from gashes on her arms. “ I want to die,” she wailed. “My life is nothing. I am pregnant, but no one believes me. They think I am lying.” She raised a blood-splattered cardigan that reeked of urine to reveal her distended belly. A middle-aged woman stopped to stare, as the howling resumed, “I can’t bear this. I hate this life!” Several policemen who patrol the station turned to find out what the commotion was about. When they spotted the girl, they nodded their heads and continued their rounds. “What kind of people have we become?” Asked one of the women in the crowd.

“Such scenes fill Muscovites with a sense of dazed anguish, partly because in the past any castoffs of the socialist state foolish enough to cause a public nuisance were either shipped out of the city, arrested under “parasite” laws or thrown into mental institutions. These days an estimated 40,000 street tramps sleep in metro tunnels and beg for change outside the new temples of affluence. While that may be less than half the homeless population of a city comparable in size, such as New York, places like Kursky station are overrun by panhandlers. Some are ill with tuberculosis. Others are covered with skin ulcers and body sores. Their mere presence is often sufficient to provoke the spleen of passersby. *“Disorder, dirt and a total lack of care for others.” says Vera Alexeyev, a*

housewife who has lived in the city for more than 10 years, "is what strikes me most about Moscow today."

'But if it is exciting to some, the breakneck pace of change only exacerbates the fears of most Muscovites. Trying to embrace the trappings of capitalism while simultaneously seeking solace in the values of a past they cannot quite remember leaves them feeling confused and lost. "One of the most frightening things about life in Moscow," says Galina Volchek, director of the Sovremennik Theatre, "is this sense of inner, psychological defencelessness, the feeling that you are totally alone in facing whatever may happen." Russians have a word for this feeling of vulnerability in the midst of wrenching change: bespredel, no limits.'

One photo, in the Time story, showing a person knee-down on the pavement begging, is captioned: THE CASUALTIES OF A DIZZYING CHANGE: Muscovites no longer have time for the capital's castaway citizens, like this old woman begging on post Tvershaya Street.

Two photos, titled: HEDONISM AND HOPELESSNESS are captioned: even as post-Soviet consumers pamper themselves in opulent Moscow boutiques and salons, a burgeoning army of the destitute, like the Ukrainian woman at right attempting to sell her cassette recorder next to one of the city's train stations, must peddle their meagre possessions to make ends meet.

ELECTIONS

The Russians have followed the footsteps of other voters in Europe. Armed with the free

vote, the people in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and elsewhere have been casting their ballots for the ex-communists organised in democratic/left socialist parties: they want not only to preserve their newly-won democratic freedoms but also, in the present situation of high unemployment, rapid decline in living standards, crime and insecurity, to recover the gains they had made under communist rule.

The present Prime Minister of Hungary was the Finance Minister in the previous Communist regime.

Lech Walesa, the dockyard electrician and trade union leader of Solidarity, with the help of the Pope and President Ronald Reagan, brought down communist rule, and later became the Head-of-State. But under his Presidency, free market capitalism and declining living standards brought through elections a communist as Prime Minister. And recently, Aleksander Kwasniewski, leader of the (formerly communist) Democratic Left Alliance defeated Lech Walesa as President.

Daniel Singer, in a story "Against Walesa, Any Solidarity?" (The Nation, 27 November 1995) sets out the factors leading to Walesa's downfall: "The feeling of insecurity and resentment against those who can afford it all and are opulently showing off undoubtedly plays a part in popular discontent, yet it would be wrong to attribute the malaise simply to psychological causes. *The discontent rests on solid foundations. It should not be forgotten that the economic shock therapy applied by Leszek Balcerowicz brought about a dramatic drop in production and living standards in 1990. If the optimistic assumptions are fulfilled, it is only next year that pre-therapy levels will be reached. Besides, one should not stick to averages. The most striking feature of the new*

system is the growing gap between rich and poor. In 1989 the incomes of the 10 percent of households at the top were five times higher than those at the bottom. Four years later they were eight times higher, and top revenues may actually be underestimated. And with unemployment still standing at more than 15 per cent and the jobless having to shift from unemployment benefits to lesser-defined forms of welfare after a year, poverty has spread dangerously - 36 per cent of the population live below the "social minimum" as calculated by the Institute of Labour, and 18 per cent live below the level of subsistence.

"Actually, housing construction is now less than half its level of 1989, and less than a quarter of its record volume ten years earlier. You can now have an accommodation you wish if you have the money. Unto everyone that hath..."