

Editor's Page

Restoring Perspectives

Many members of the Wayne County Medical Society have recently returned from a group-sponsored trip to the Soviet Union. This was no simple vacation. The pace was hectic, and the trip was anything but relaxing. But, it was most fascinating to have an intimate if brief look at life in a society that is so entirely different from our own. More importantly: it made it possible for the traveler to have a long look backwards from a distance at our own society, contrasting it with that of the Soviet Union, thus restoring distorted perspectives.



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The lot of the average Soviet citizen has improved markedly since October 1917, the time of the so-called Great October Revolution. There were not too many smiles in Russia, even now, and the general mood was serious, somber, but not unfriendly. Tremendous advances have occurred in housing, education, technology and self-esteem.

The eyes of most Russians, at least in the few cities visited, were neither depressed nor empty. The Russians are well-fed and reasonably well-clothed, although tastelessly so. The previously forgotten Russian peasant has now become a citizen in a super-powerful state, and his basic needs are guaranteed. There is no unemployment, practically no street crime, no open racial conflict. Subway stations in the cities that are usually visited by foreigners are beautiful, absolutely clean and completely clear of graffiti. Streets and roads are unbelievably litter free.

Yet, fear is a constant companion. It is not the same fear that was present in Stalin's day, when agents of the KGB were suspected of being everywhere, and when the dreaded knock on the door in the dead of night was always feared. But it is clear to all, and the regime actively encourages the notion that the amenities of the average citizen are not his natural right but a privilege that he may enjoy only as long as he does not step too far out of line.

The presence of the all-watchful, ever present Big Brother is to be found everywhere; large, white on red, morale-boosting banners are spanned across many roads. Red flags are brought out by the millions on festive occasions, and the stern face of Lenin, with his piercing eyes, is found all over. He is without doubt, the Soviet Christ.

It was truly delightful to come back to Western civilization, less oppressive, less regimented, less ominous, more colorful and much lighter in spirit. Yet on looking into the eyes of Detroiters and suburbanites, the eyes seem dimmer and more lifeless. Faces appear glum, and the index of suspicion is unquestionably higher than that generally found on the streets of Soviet cities.

Fear of another type is stalking our streets; not the fear of Big Brother watching over us, but fear of our own brother walking toward us, perhaps with a knife. Crime is rampant, individual civic responsibility is practically absent, the streets are dirty. Boarded-up houses and burned-out skeletons of stores dot the streets of this and every other city. Apartment buildings into which millions of dollars of Federal money have been poured, only to stand empty with all windows broken, are a common sight, in sharp contrast with their total absence in the Soviet Union.

In spite of all propaganda to the contrary, Soviet society is far from being classless. The privileged, there as everywhere, are much better off than the poor, whose very existence is denied by official Soviet propaganda. Rural medical clinics, for instance, often do not have even a single X-ray machine available to them, and only primitive laboratory facilities. Equipment for the performance of blood tests that are routine in

the United States is usually not available at all, and only the absolute basic tests are used. Diagnoses are reached without adequate scientific data, according to most American standards. In major Soviet cities, on the other hand, top clinics and hospitals belonging to the "Fourth Division" of the Ministry of Health have facilities similar to those found among the best here. These facilities are open, however, only to politically influential members of Soviet society and to leaders of World Communism.

Without doubt, the standard of living of all classes in the United States is much higher than in the Soviet Union, the rich are richer and the poor less needy, although frequently deprived of basic human dignity. Even the poor in the United States usually have sufficient food, housing with basic facilities and frequently may even own an old car. In the Soviet Union a car is usually out of the reach of all but a privileged few.

And yet disappointment, dissatisfaction and despair are commonly present in the United States. Although we have more, many in our society are bitter and disillusioned, frustrated and angry because they have less than they would like to have and less than they feel they should have. Expectations rise unrealistically as unfulfillable promises are made daily without restraint.

In the name of Democracy, the right of the criminal and of the deviant are jealously guarded, while the rights of law-abiding citizens are frequently compromised. The message is imparted that a lack of internal controls is excusable, if it supposedly is a result of social injustice. Courts of law and libertarians of all backgrounds have united to hack away at restraints that limit the individual within society. All controls have been attacked, belittled and besmirched. Controls from within have frequently been confused with controls from without, and equally condemned. The legal system and the mass media must share the burden of responsibility with a national leadership that for several decades now has tried to please, satisfy, and even appease the individual, rather than educate him or her to live within the boundaries of reality and its limited resources.

The concept of Freedom is being distorted when it is expanded beyond reason. Total freedom is anarchy. Groups and individuals who are pathologically suspicious of any and all authority contribute to the weakening of the basic fibre of our society, in which the dignity of Man and the right of his spirit to soar boundlessly were always paramount. Unless this trend is reversed, and reversed very soon, a real possibility exists that healthy totalitarian regimes may well outlive our sick society.

The citizen in the Soviet Union has many responsibilities but only little freedom. The opposite is true in our society. We have much freedom but little individual responsibility. This was not always so. We are committing errors that are serious, and possibly fatal, to the continued existence of this Republic and of democratic society. Fuller responsibility for oneself and respect for the rights and dignity of others must again assume their legitimate place, or else we may well be the last generation to have any freedom at all.

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