The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union

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What Ails the Soviet System?

As the post-Brezhnev era takes shape, the survival of the Soviet system is not in question, but the utility of many of its policies is. The regime's estimate of the severity of Soviet problems finds expression in the wooly language of official ideology. It shows substantial rethinking of how far the USSR has progressed from socialism, the transitional state ushered in by the Russian Revolution, toward communism, the Marxist nirvana of affluence and equality. The 1961 Communist Party Program, adopted in Nikita Khrushchev's heyday, maintained that the Soviet Union was in the thick of the "full-scale construction of communism," which would be attained in its essentials by the early 1980s. By contrast, Leonid Brezhnev's precept of "developed socialism" bespoke less optimism about the future but more contentment with the present. Representing the USSR's socialism as developed connoted that its condition was acceptable and stable, if not ideal.

As the Brezhnev period wound down, greater pessimism crept into Soviet doctrine. In a major speech in 1982, seven months before succeeding Brezhnev as General Secretary, Yuri Andropov declared that the USSR was merely engaged in "perfecting" developed socialism, and was at an early stage at that. He argued that the full realization of socialist ideals, let alone communism, "will be

a most complicated process, inevitably connected with the overcoming of contradictions and difficulties," certain of them more intractable than others. "In some areas we will be able to move more quickly, in others more slowly. This is what the real map of social progress is like. It cannot be smoothed out into a straight line."[1] Words to this effect were woven into the revised party program ratified at the 1986 party congress. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev disclosed there that, during the internal debate over the program, some party members had proposed excision of all references to "developed socialism," a recipe which, he conceded, had "often . . . been reduced to a mere recitation of successes." Gorbachev announced that the label would be retained, but with an accent on "the problems embedded in the legacy from previous stages," which together could not be solved until some undefined point in the twenty-first century.[2]

Contradictions and Difficulties

What are these "contradictions and difficulties" that have so set back the Soviet regime's timetable? Some, especially at the level of the individual and social group, do not lend themselves to exact measurement. Personal conduct and morality make up one such problem area, the subject recently of frequent and caustic comment in the official media. One *Pravda* homily on "the struggle with various kinds of negative phenomena in the life of our society" cites "violations of labor discipline, embezzlement and bribe-taking, profiteering and sponging, drunkenness and hooliganism, displays of a private-property and money-grubbing psychology, toadyism and servility." All had become more prevalent of late, and all "significantly damage socialist society, the state, and hence the personality."[3] Tensions between the Russian majority and the dozens of smaller Soviet nationalities, also said to be on the rise, are not much easier to calculate with precision. Andropov, however, found it necessary shortly after taking power to decry "national conceit . . . the tendency toward isolation . . . the disrespectful attitude toward other nations and peoples" finding increasing currency among Soviet ethnic groups.[4]

Many of the adverse tendencies in Soviet life can be pinpointed with considerably more rigor than this. Demographic

trends provide telling examples. Aggregate growth of the Soviet population dropped 50 percent between 1960 and 1980. The current rate of 0.8 percent a year disturbs a regime that has customarily identified national power with population size. It also has economic repercussions, for it cramps the growth of the work force and inflates the population share of the retired, who must be supported by those who work; 16 percent of all Soviet citizens are now pensioners, and they will make up 20 percent by the year 2000. Perhaps the most unnerving demographic data relate to death rates and life expectancy. The Soviet crude death rate, which bottomed out at 6.9 per 1,000 in 1964, jumped by 50 percent to 10.3 in 1980—a turn of events said by a leading U.S. expert to be "unique in the history of developed countries."[5] Deaths among middle-aged men shot up particularly quickly, in the process pulling down the life expectancy for Soviet males at age zero from 67 years in 1964 to an estimated 62 years in 1980; female life expectancy was lowered during the same period from 76 to 73 years. The causes encompass factors as diverse as alcohol abuse, higher stress levels, worsened hygiene, and overloaded hospitals. The rise in mortality has not been confined to the adult population but extended to young children in the early 1970s. According to official Soviet statistics, the infant mortality rate, after declining from 80.7 per 1,000 live births in 1950 to a low of 22.9 in 1971, increased to 27.9 in 1974 and 30.8 in 1975. While as much as half of the observed increase in infant deaths may have been due to improved methods of statistical reporting, the trend was still highly disturbing to the Soviet authorities.[6]

Most graphically conveyed in numbers, and of the greatest moment to politics, are the Soviet Union's economic problems. Although Soviet and Western indices differ on minor points, there is unanimity over one essential thing: the Soviet economy has been in a protracted growth slump, and the regime and the population are smarting from the effects. The annual rate of expansion of the Soviet GNP, 4.9 percent in the 1966–70 planning period, dipped to 3.1 percent in 1971–75, 2.3 percent in 1976–80, and 2.2 percent in 1981–85. Growth of 3.5 percent in 1983, the first year after Brezhnev's death, was taken by some as a rebound of lasting significance, but the figure then subsided to 1.5 percent in 1984 and 1.6 percent in 1985, leaving the summary picture unchanged.[7]

The sharp downward break in industry in 1975–76 was followed by stagnation in some long-time showcase branches, including steel and coal production. Energy has become a major economic headache. Titanic efforts in the west Siberian fields after 1977 were not enough to keep oil production from standing nearly still in 1980–83 and then sliding by 1.4 percent in 1984–85, and power outages and brownouts have grown in frequency. Agriculture remains a weak and volatile sector despite abnormally high farm employment and voluminous infusions of capital under Brezhnev. Net agricultural output, which advanced by 3.7 percent a year in 1961–70, was up by an anemic 0.9 percent a year in 1971–79 and declined far below planned levels in 1979–82. The Soviets have published no proper statistics on grain production since 1980, but early U.S. government estimates indicate perhaps 1.8 percent annual growth in agricultural output in 1981–85.

Personal consumption, gauging the goods and services the Soviet household gets from the economy, has been under similar pressure. Growth in per capita consumption slipped to 2.2 percent a year in 1976–80 (as opposed to 5.1 percent ten years before), with food, housing, recreation, and educational and health services faring the worst. It appears to have inched up at only about 1 percent a year in 1981–85, and most Western specialists have been predicting no greater growth in the second half of the 1980s. Food supply, though apparently holding its own in terms of caloric intake, has in many parts of the country worsened for items over and above the staples of bread and potatoes. Some Soviet reports now attest no improvement at all in the provision of food over the last two decades: "It has become especially evident how the food problem has worsened in comparison with the mid-1960s."[8] Lineups outside shops for food and consumer goods seem to have become more prevalent in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and rationing of key foods (such as butter, sugar, and milk for children) was reintroduced in some Soviet cities at this time.

Not only has Soviet economic performance ebbed, it has also lagged significantly in relation to other countries. Since growth rates normally subside as economies develop, one would expect the Soviet Union's growth to be outpacing the more advanced capitalist economies. Yet, a comparison with the sixteen OECD countries shows the reverse. Soviet growth rates, which had outstripped the OECD by 0.4 percent a year in 1966–70, fell 1 percent behind in the late 1970s. In per capita consumption, the USSR trailed OECD annual growth by 1.4 percent, inverting an earlier Soviet advantage of

0.6 percent. After closing the chasm some between Soviet and Western standards of living, the Soviets have watched it open up again since the mid-1970s, especially in housing, recreation, health, and education.[9]

Explaining the Soviet Union's Problems

What lies behind these untoward trends? The underlying difficulties with which the Soviet state must grapple can be divided into six categories: the congestion of the policy agenda by perennial, new, and resurgent problems; the obsolescence of old policy formulas, especially in the economy; new doubts about ethnic identity; the widening split between popular expectations and Soviet reality; the turn toward a self-centered morality; and the mixed benefits of the regime's minimal reforms.

A crowded political agenda. When Gorbachev expounded in 1986 on how, during the Brezhnev years, "Problems in the country's development accumulated faster than they were resolved," he was not adverting to any single type of problem.[10] Many of the issues before the Politburo today are perennial ones, passed on without final resolution from decade to decade. In the economic realm, the Hungarian scholar Janos Kornai has depicted the Soviet system as a "chronic-shortage economy," in which planners, firms, and households constantly feel deprived of material resources. In the absence of markets through which needed inputs can reliably be secured, Soviet decision makers habitually engage in strategic behavior—in particular, hoarding of resources and attempts to shift the burden of uncertainty onto the shoulders of others—and this perpetuates shortages and the psychology feeding them.[11] Soviet leaders have been struggling to manage endemic shortage ever since the Soviet command economy was set up under Joseph Stalin in the early 1930s. They have also encountered over the years, in one guise or another, many of the other issues on Gorbachev's priority list—corruption, ethnic tension, public hygiene and health problems, anomie among the young, and so forth.

What, then, is distinctive about the political agenda of the 1980s? The most obvious difference from ten or fifteen years ago is the widely shared belief that certain of the USSR's perennial difficulties have become more acute and pressing. Related to this is the perception, not without foundation, that the Soviet Union has in some fields of endeavor relapsed and, modern though it may be in other respects, once again has to give priority attention to tasks usually linked with economic and social backwardness. Problems the regime thought it had resolved, or at least held in check, have in recent years come back to haunt it. Exceptionally clumsy or ossified policies have helped reanimate some dormant difficulties, as have skimping on resources and the coming due of bills, as it were, for deferred social and economic maintenance. Well before Brezhnev's death, Soviet critics were wondering out loud whether failure to stop backsliding might some day force the regime "to rebuild, to unlearn our acquired habits, . . . in a certain sense to turn around and start over," at untold cost.[12]

Examples abound. The bulge in death rates in the late 1960s and 1970s pointed to a partial unwinding of previous accomplishments in medicine and health care. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the mortality statistics, for adults as much as infants, mirrored a deterioration in the quality of Soviet life more broadly. The housing situation, the improvement of which was one of Khrushchev's great achievements, offers another illustration. Thanks to the poor showing of the housing lobby in the budget wars after Brezhnev's accession, the number of apartments completed by Soviet construction organizations since 1969 has failed to keep up with new families formed. Although new apartments are roomier and better designed, Soviet urbanologists and municipal executives are now writing about the quantitative shortage of housing with a plaintiveness not heard since the 1950s.

Agriculture and food supply are an additional sector in which evidence of decay was plentiful by the late Brezhnev period. Brezhnev boasted in the early 1970s that the regime had solved the food problem, but he had long stopped doing so by the end of the decade, when some foreign experts were going so far as to wonder if the Soviet farm system was not sliding into absolute decline. Certain of the regime's own actions lend credence to such a conclusion, notably its decision in early 1979—before the four-year string of disastrously bad grain harvests—to make compulsory what had been a spontaneous move toward re-establishing subsidiary plots and gardens at industrial plants and other non-farm enterprises. For the

average Russian, once again seeing a cabbage patch or chicken coop in the courtyard of his factory or institute was a throwback to the lean 1930s and wartime years and a glum commentary on the collective and state farms.

What is fascinating about the present-day Soviet Union is the simultaneous eruption of these symptoms of regression and of afflictions of the opposite sort. As the leaders have known for some time, the very accomplishments of building a machine-based industrial economy and a modern, urban society have been bringing the country up against new and hitherto unanticipated problems—those of success. Economic planners who used to dictate with relative ease deliveries of pig iron and cement are now taxed to the limit by schemes for computerization and robotization, none of which could have been so much as discussed had previous economic successes not occurred. Some of the upsurge in infant mortality in the early 1970s is explained by analogous successes in health care. As births were shifted from small, ill-equipped delivery rooms in rural areas to larger urban hospitals with better equipment, more infants were saved from asphixia during childbirth. The revived infants, however, were particularly vulnerable to illness, and thousands of deaths that would earlier have been recorded as stillbirths (not affecting the infant mortality rate) now entered the statistics as infant deaths. "Paradoxically, . . . one reason for the increase in infant mortality rates in European Russia during the early years of the last decade [was] an improved medical care delivery system—an improvement that affected the system unevenly."[13]

Many of the emergent ills of progress in the Soviet Union are less economic and technical than social and cultural. So it is that environmental pollution, a consequence of rapid and unregulated industrialization long passed over by the government, became in the 1960s and 1970s a gripping issue for widening portions of the Soviet population, and it is bound to remain so. In natural science, Soviet breakthroughs in molecular biology and recombinant DNA research have raised the same questions of technique and conscience posed in other advanced countries. The foreign reader of Soviet debates on genetic engineering "is increasingly struck by the similarity of these discussions to the ones that have been occurring in the West."[14] Urbanization, while intensely desired by the regime, has also bred new issues. The Soviet Union, mostly rural in 1917, now

has almost 300 cities with populations of over 100,000 and 20 larger than a million, all badly in need of integration and servicing. Traffic congestion and a shortage of parking, in their own way proof of economic advancement, have come to pose a serious concern. The profusion of huge tracts of high-rise housing, welcomed by all as a needed response to the apartment shortage, has created a faceless and monotonous milieu. Soviet musings about how to humanize their cities remind one of inquiries elsewhere in the developed world.[15]

The Soviet leaders' political agenda is crowded, then, by issues differing in point of origin, incubation period, tenacity, and seriousness. Along with many of the inveterate problems that puzzled their predecessors, they confront new problems of modernity and renascent problems of backwardness.

Old formulas lose their effectiveness. The Soviet Union, probably to a greater extent than most countries, lives by time-tested practice. It addresses its major problems with remarkably stable formulas and approaches. The catch is that sooner or later all old habits generate diminishing returns. This waning effectiveness of inherited solutions accounts for no small part of the load under which the regime now labors.

The main reason that familiar formulas misfire is that the conditions under which they were first defined evolve more quickly than the formula itself. This has happened in area after area as Soviet society has developed. The party's system of political education, for instance, was set up after the Revolution to carry its gospel, through personal agitation and simple texts, to an illiterate or semiliterate population. Although it did a serviceable job in the early years, it has a good deal less impact on today's better educated and more discriminating Soviet public, and it makes stunningly inept use of modern electronic technology. The Soviet hospital and clinic system, to take a different example, successfully introduced elementary health care and curbed epidemic disease in a largely agrarian country. Today it is less in tune with an urbanized and industrialized society with sedentary occupations, high tension levels, heavy air and water pollution, richer diets, and greater alcohol consumption. In the field of culture and entertainment, official taste typically lags behind the public's, and for this reason popular

art forms that have atrophied in other modern countries—big bands, music hall ensembles, and circuses are some of them—linger on in the Soviet Union, bureaucratically run and subsidized by the state.[16]

The pattern of declining dividends bears particularly upon the Soviet economy. The USSR's traditional economic model was outfitted with, in Charles Lindblom's apt metaphor, strong thumbs but no fingers.[17] Potent indeed were the thumbs of government ownership of the means of production, highly centralized planning of inputs and outputs, direct administrative control over factories and farms, and periodic campaigns for implementing the latest political priorities. Beginning with Stalin's first five-year plans, they were used to propel the Soviet Union through the phase of "extensive" growth, as the Soviets (using the same terminology as Western economists) now call it. This was done primarily by vastly increasing the quantity of inputs into the economy—land, capital, raw materials, energy, and above all labor—through mobilization from above. The Soviet leaders got the high growth tempos they wanted, notwithstanding gross inefficiencies in the use of resources. The shortcomings tolerated for decades were many. Central planners, lacking scarcity prices to indicate social value and responsible for thousands of "material balances," as the resource transfers between firms and branches were labeled, faced a herculean task of coordination. This led to a concentration on quantity of production at the expense of quality and to frequent disequilibria and bottlenecks. Economic ministries and enterprise managers, for their part, perfected elaborate dodges, costly to the economy as a whole, for protecting themselves from the center and from other firms. Households and individual consumers had to make do with few and poor goods and services, by international standards, and employee motivation inevitably suffered.

One glaring weakness of the command economy has had to do with technological innovation. The Soviet economic mechanism may do quite well when assigned a mission of national importance by politicians, but without that impetus it has manifested a deep-seated bias against innovation. Not infrequently, as Mikhail Gorbachev has observed, "an enterprise puts out outmoded production of a low technological level, or consumer goods for which there is no demand, but lives normally and at times even flourishes."[18]

Cross-national studies show Soviet technological attainment to have worsened since the mid-1960s in relation to other countries. The comparison is particularly unflattering with Japan, which once operated on the same technical plane as the Soviets but is now duelling the United States for world leadership.[19]

Computerization of the economy, indispensable to late twentieth-century manufacturing and service industries, began under Brezhnev, but barely so. The USSR is thought to have in place at present about 100,000 mainframes and minicomputers, compared to the United States' 1.3 million, and only a few thousand microcomputers and personal computers, a tiny fraction of the Americans' 25 million.[20] It was estimated in 1985 that more than one-third of all Soviet industrial machinery and equipment "is simply worn out," exerting "a most unfavorable effect on productivity." The repair of outdated equipment absorbs the labor of 6 million workers, 35 billion rubles in annual expenditures, every sixth ton of iron and steel produced, and every fifth machine tool in the country.[21] The lack of competition between firms is an obvious reason for this failing, magnified by the protection of the Soviet economy from world market forces. Soviet managers are not rewarded for innovation. Nor are they often penalized for the lack of it. As Joseph Berliner puts it, the Soviet economy is missing not only the coordinating "invisible hand" of the marketplace but the "invisible foot applied vigorously to the backside" of unproductive enterprises under capitalism.[22]

Problems of coordination, quality, and innovation, which have always plagued the Soviet economy, have recently become more blatant—and the need for finer, suppler fingers of management more crying—because circumstances have changed. Slowly but surely, application of the coarse thumbs of the classic formula has brought into being a mature, albeit imbalanced, industrial economy that is many times larger and incomparably more complex—hence harder to direct from a single point—than the primitive economic machine of Stalin's day. Equally serious, the cheap resources around which the original Soviet blueprint for industrialization was drawn up have now been largely exhausted, as became increasingly apparent in the 1970s. Few opportunities exist any more to bring more land under the plow, other than by huge expenditures on irrigation and drainage. Investment needs have clashed directly

with those of the military and the consumer sector, as became painfully evident in the 1976–80 and 1981–85 five-year plans. For the most part, raw materials and energy are still plentiful in absolute amount; but conveniently located stocks of both have been depleted, and the richest reserves are now found east of the Urals. Energy, in particular, has exacted a much heavier toll from the leadership since the 1977 near-panic over oil production, both in effort and in funds to pay for exploitation of new sources on the Siberian frontier, maintenance of old fields (including oil wells prematurely degraded by wasteful water-injection methods), and greatly heightened transportation costs.[23]

The tight supply of labor is the most worrisome resource constraint of all. The pools of underutilized labor tapped in the past, mainly in the villages and among women, have pretty well dried up. The interaction of lower birth rates and the aging of the population has in the most recent period wrenched back the rate of net increase in the labor force. Whereas the population of normal working age (aged 20 to 59) expanded by 8.5 million in 1971–75 and a very high 13.8 million in 1976–80, it was expected to grow by only 7.7 million in 1981–85. In 1986–90, with the entry of the small group born in the second half of the 1960s and the retirement of the large numbers of Soviets born in the second half of the 1920s, the able-bodied population will actually decline by 1.0 million. There will be some recovery in 1991–95, to an increase of 4.2 million workers, but the increment for 1996–2000 will be only 1.5 million.[24] New work hands, moreover, are unevenly distributed geographically and ethnically. The European part of the country, the location of most established industry, will lose manpower over the rest of the century, while all of the gains will be in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus.

Although the Brezhnev leadership accepted in principle the need to adopt an "intensive" growth strategy, it made little headway in this direction. As Gorbachev observed later, "Due to inertia, the economy continued to be developed to a considerable degree on an extensive basis, oriented toward the drawing into production of extra labor and material resources."[25] Rather than making better use of dwindling resources, the only way growth rates could have been sustained, the Soviets used them less effectively than they had before. Total factor productivity in the Soviet economy (the increase

in output per added unit of capital and labor input) is the best yardstick of this. After rising by 1.1 percent a year in the second half of the 1960s, it declined at an annual rate of 0.5 percent in the first half of the 1970s, about 1.2 percent in 1976–80, and about 0.9 percent in 1981–85. In industry, negative growth in total factor productivity commenced in the mid-1970s.[26]

New questions about ethnic identity. The changing relations among Soviet ethnic groups also impinge upon the regime's agenda. The Soviet Union, it should never be overlooked, is a multinational state, the most heterogeneous in ethnic makeup of any large industrial society. The 137 million Russians (the total as of the 1979 census) are by a big margin the largest single ethnic community, and they dominate Soviet institutions and political culture, but they constitute a bare majority (52 percent) of the total population. A hundred-odd other nationalities, living under Moscow's sway since before the Revolution though still concentrated in their ancestral territories, are arrayed in a great arc around the Russian heartland. The Russians' fellow Slavs (mostly Ukrainians and Belorussians) account for 20 percent of the population, with the other major European groups representing 8 percent. Of the remainder, the biggest bloc by far is the 17 percent of Moslem heritage, speaking languages akin to Turkish or Persian and based predominantly in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaidzhan in the Caucasus. Among the twenty-one non-Russian nationalities numbering more than a million, the majority of the members of all but two speak chiefly their mother tongue. Fourteen of the biggest non-Russian groups, ranging from the 42 million Ukrainians to the 1 million Estonians, have their own "union republics," national units which together with the RSFSR (Russian Republic) are the formal partners in the Soviet federation.

Stalin, though a Georgian by birth, ruled as one of the most fervent Russian nationalists in the country's history. The national minorities were kept in line by symbolic concessions, economic development programs, inculcation of the Russian language, administrative controls, and, of course, the brute force of purges and, for unlucky groups like the Crimean Tatars and the Volga Germans, mass deportations. Khrushchev abjured violence as part of his de-Stalinization drive, but otherwise acted inconsistently on the na-

tionality question, putting greater emphasis on the legislative and economic rights of the union republics while at the same time pursuing cultural integration and insisting that ethnic divisions were on their way to being obliterated.

The leadership under Brezhnev took a less rosy view, replacing Khrushchev's theory of the imminent merger (*sliyaniye*) of the minorities into the Russian majority with the idea of rapprochement (*sblizheniye*) among the Soviet nationalities. Rising Kremlin concern about the ethnic issue was demonstrated by the revival in the late 1960s of the moribund discipline of ethnography and the creation of a new Scientific Council for Nationality Problems under the Academy of Sciences. The interest in research and soliciting expert advice was accompanied by a fuller recognition in official statements of the obstinacy of ethnic identities and the hazards of communal conflict. Concern about the ethnic balance (though not only this) prompted Brezhnev's call in 1976 for development of an "effective demographic policy." Greater heed was paid to language policy, and especially the systematic teaching of Russian. A detailed Council of Ministers resolution on Russian-language instruction outside the RSFSR appeared in 1978, and the first of several major conferences on implementation was held the following year in Tashkent.[27]

The post-Brezhnev leaders have continued this trend toward raising the profile of the nationality issue. In the most forthright acknowledgment of the problem to date, Yuri Andropov declared in December 1982 that the economic and social development of ethnic communities "is inevitably accompanied by the growth of their national self-consciousness," not by its decline. The ideal of melting the Soviet nationalities into one has not been discarded, but it has been relegated to the remote future, after a classless and fully communist society has been constructed. In the meantime, Andropov said, "problems in the relations among nationalities will not be crossed off our agenda." They would demand the "special concern and constant attention of the party," which had to be endowed with "a well-thought-out, scientifically based nationality policy."[28] Five months later, Andropov's Politburo announced that it would step up Russian-language training.[29]

What concrete signs, aside from the Soviet leaders' own expressions of foreboding, attest to growing ethnic friction? The most

palpable is the greater openness with which the various nationalities' concerns and demands are being articulated. Non-Russians feel less inhibited than they did a generation ago about showing pride in their natural surroundings, literary traditions, crafts and music, and links to cultural communities (Islam, for example) that transcend state frontiers. Recognition of ethnic distinctiveness and of the individual group's contribution to the Soviet whole is being insisted upon by many officials, and more generally by the literate and urbanized middle classes that have emerged in the national republics.[30] Some local politicians have sympathized enough with national grievances to be charged with ethnic exclusivism—most prominently Petr Shelest, the party first secretary of the Ukraine, who was dismissed and condemned as a closet Ukrainian nationalist in 1972. Ethnic grievances became in the 1960s and 1970s a conspicuous theme in political dissent. The appeals of Soviet Jews for the right to emigrate, and of the Crimean Tatars for return of the homeland from which Stalin evicted them during World War II, were but the most vocal of many such demands. There have been mass public demonstrations against Moscow's cultural and linguistic policy in several areas, notably in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas in May 1972 (where paratroopers had to be called in to disperse crowds after a Lithuanian student, Romas Kalanta, committed self-immolation) and in Georgia in April 1978, during the discussion of the Georgian language's standing in the republic's constitution. A few nationality protests have taken a violent turn, the most serious incident being the bomb blast in the Moscow subway in January 1977, set off by a group seeking Armenian secession.

Strange though it may sound, even the Great Russians, or at least many intellectuals among them, are feeling a similar frustration and pent-up nationalism. Like Lithuanians, Georgians, or Uzbeks, "they too are concerned about the right to express their national identity [and] about the homogenization of their culture."[31] The government-approved movements to preserve historical buildings and the verdant beauty of the Russian countryside draw on a recrudescent Russian nationalism, as does the ideologically less acceptable interest in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Ethnic loyalties seem also to be intruding more into economic and socioeconomic policy areas. This is visibly so in the competition

for investment resources, which has become keener as Soviet economic growth has tapered off. Partisans and opponents of regional mega-projects—like exploitation of Siberian oil and gas, rerouting of northern Russian rivers to parched Central Asia, and rehabilitation of the Ukraine's Donbass coal fields—have invoked national dignity and rights alongside narrowly utilitarian arguments. Similarly, rivalry between Russians and non-Russians over professional and administrative jobs has picked up in the minority areas, despite an affirmative action policy favoring native personnel for most positions. The economic slowdown of the 1970s shriveled career opportunities just as the expansion of higher education for late-modernizing groups, especially Moslems, produced larger graduating classes of native cadres. Crackdowns on local corruption rings have sparked further ethnic controversy, drawing "false lamentations that merciless criticism of negative phenomena somehow infringes upon national honor."[32] Attachments to a national style of life have stymied efforts by Soviet planners to get workers to relocate from labor-surplus areas, especially Central Asia, to construction sites and factories in Siberia and other regions where manpower is in short supply. Ethnic considerations also shaded the debate over demographic policy in the 1970s, as academics and officials tried in vain to devise a way to elicit higher fertility in the Slavic republics without simultaneously encouraging it among Moslem women. For this more than any other reason, the measures, when brought out in 1981, were mild and ineffective.

Looking ahead, the longest shadow is cast over the Soviet ethnic scene by demographic trends. The most alarming from the Russian vantage point is the enormous asymmetry in fertility between the European population, Russians included, and the other Soviet peoples. By far the swiftest natural increase is that of the Moslem nationalities, which suffered less from World War II and other earlier demographic catastrophes, which retain an age and sex structure conducive to high fertility, and among whom large families are sanctioned by religion and culture. In the 1970s, the total number of Soviet Moslems grew at an annual rate (2.5 percent) more than quadruple the rate of the Russians. The inescapable result is a heavier weight for non-Russians and non-Europeans in the Soviet population as a whole and, before too many years are out, the loss by the Russians of their majority position. Government demographic policy seems likely to have little or no effect on this outcome. Whereas the Russian population is expected to creep up by only 3 million between 1979 and 2000, and the number of other Slavs by another 3 million, the increase for Moslems will be, depending on the projection, 20 to 31 million. By the turn of the century, the Russian share of the total population will be down to 45 to 47 percent and the Moslem share up to roughly half of that.[33]

The growing expectations gap. Never is there a perfect match between what a government does and what its population expects it to do. What counts politically is the size of the gap and the direction in which it is moving. One element in the Soviet regime's present quandary is that a large and widening gulf has opened between performance and aspirations.

To the ultrarepressive Stalinist state of a generation ago, Soviet citizens did look for some irreducible benefits—a basic education, employment, shelter, free medical care, defense against foreign powers—as interviews with refugees after World War II established. Even during Stalin's lifetime, in the period of postwar reconstruction, the regime was reaching out to the Soviet middle class with a "Big Deal," predicated on material comfort in exchange for support for the regime.[34] In the wake of Stalin's death, aspirations escalated rapidly, and among all sections of the population. The regime's own rhetorical excesses were partly responsible for this. The bragging of the 1961 party program that the Soviet Union would eclipse the United States economically by 1980 (as it happened, Soviet GNP per capita was but one-third of the American by 1980) was only the most hyperbolic of a chain of such promises. Of more consequence was the tacit pact with society that, with the shedding of both the social utopianism of the revolutionary period and the indiscriminate political terror of the Stalin era, the regime was henceforth to be judged essentially by its ability to "deliver the goods" to the people.[35] Though the Brezhnev leadership muffled the Khrushchevian sloganeering, and harped more in its later years on the spiritual superiority of the "socialist way of life," it left the basic vow of material improvement intact. By continuing with Khrushchev's egalitarian wage policy and freezing most consumer prices, it also let it be known that it favored spreading the payoffs across all major social groups.

Mass aspirations have been further galvanized, as in so many other societies, by the rising educational profile of the population. Universal literacy has pumped up self-esteem and facilitated comparisons of social condition, and higher education, in particular, has stimulated young people to be critical of Soviet shortcomings and to covet respected and rewarding careers in which their knowledge can be used. Another accelerator has been the unlimbering of communication within Soviet society, both among specialists and at the level of the mass media—especially television, which came into general use only under Brezhnev. This has spotlighted the regime's specific failings and contributed to a broadly based yearning for the good things of life.[36] Enhanced contact with the outside world, direct and indirect, has also played a role. Accurate knowledge of the West is still largely the preserve of professional elites, who have substantial access to foreign publications, the language skills to read them, and some hope of foreign travel. But a diffuse (and sometimes exaggerated) awareness and envy of the West's wealth, and a concomitant interest in American and West European news and cultural fads, now exists among all strata of Soviet society. No less arousing has been the example of the communist states of Eastern Europe, to which Soviet citizens have had infinitely greater exposure through propaganda, military service, and tourism. Here, in some countries at least, consumers get a much better deal from institutions originally modeled on the USSR's.

The regime's performance since Stalin in meeting mass expectations has been satisfactory in a fundamental sense. But it is also true that the regime has been losing ground: the distance between its actions and popular aspirations has increased. On many issues, including consumer goods and food, the slide is associated with the later phases of Brezhnevism. On others, it began somewhat earlier. In either case, as Gorbachev said in 1986 of the economy in total, "a breach (*razryv*) was formed between society's demands and the achieved level of production."[37]

Possibly, defenders of the regime console themselves with the knowledge that some kinds of poor performance by Soviet institutions have acted to depress expectations. Consider one question well studied by Soviet social scientists: diminishing access by ambitious Soviet youth to high-status occupations. If in the early 1950s 77 percent of all daytime secondary-school graduates were being

admitted to higher education, the stepping-stone to a professional or managerial career, and 57 percent as late as the early 1960s, by the early 1970s (as many more tenth-graders jostled for entrance and universities and institutes grew at a slower pace) only 22 percent were making it in. A scant 20 percent were admitted in 1977.[38] Following their initial disappointment, many young people in fact adapted to the new conditions by entering technical and vocational programs and lowering their sights. Once in the work force, they often "feel themselves in social terms to be no worse off than those who became [university] students and acquired a diploma . . . Youth is quite tactfully grasping the change in the real situation."[39]

This, however, does not mean the larger problem is self-correcting. For one thing, expectations thwarted in some areas are being diverted into others. As one sociologist wrote in 1975 about the young person barred entrance to the university, such an individual tends to seek out satisfactions "that would compensate for his loss," including higher pay and better leisure.[40] Nor have expectations been ebbing nearly as quickly as regime performance. Studies of Soviet buying habits observe that citizens now feel entitled to more and better goods than in the past, that "the demands of people have significantly grown, and industry trails along behind them."[41] Over the whole gamut of issues, particularly those touching on popular welfare, it is fair to say that the expectations gap has been stretched out during the last decade.

Another poignant fact about expectations is that under Soviet conditions the continued wilting of hope and belief in the future is apt to be extremely damaging to the regime itself. In a system where the state doubles as employer and provider of goods and services, popular despondency can feed back directly onto the state's ability to realize its own goals. While some puncturing of unrealistic expectations has been expedient, past a certain juncture it becomes counterproductive because it sullies people's willingness to work. There were many in the Soviet Union by the late Brezhnev period who thought that this divide had already been reached, that disaffected workers and managers were simply putting out less on the job. The "social factor" or "human factor," as it was often referred to, was presented as the final link in a vicious circle: society gets and expects less, so it gives less; the state promises and gives less, so it gets less. A prominent Soviet economist and sociologist, Academi-

cian Tat'yana Zaslavskaya, two years before Brezhnev's death placed the expectations gap and the motivation issue at the hub of the regime's predicament. Inducing the worker-consumer to produce in a low-growth economy with a flat earnings structure, she said, "now forms a unique 'solar plexus,' the center of all the socioeconomic problems of our society."[42]

The reach for private solutions. Because of the regime's faltering capacity to slake popular demands, Soviet citizens have increasingly sought gratification from other sources. This interest did not originate in the last ten or fifteen years, but it clearly gathered momentum during that interval. The partial withdrawal of citizens from public life, which takes a multitude of forms, compounds the Soviet system's many other difficulties.

Ordinary folk exhibit this spirit when, the blandishments of the regime to the contrary, they follow their own lights in making the key life-cycle decisions. Divorces, abortions, common-law marriages, and illegitimate births, all legal but disapproved, are more numerous. In the European regions, women have fewer children than the government wants, in Asia more. Choices about employment and location are weakly regulated and expensive to managers and planners, all owing to "the fact that migration depends on the personal element, on the taking by the individual of the voluntary decision to change his place of residence."[43]

A different and destructive avenue of escape is provided by vodka, the consumption of which has climbed at a speed disconcerting to the leaders, the medical profession, and many others. "The problem of drunkenness and alcoholism," to quote the 1985 party resolution that at long last tried to come to terms with it, "has been exacerbated in recent years."[44] Soviet per capita consumption of alcoholic beverages, rated in liters of pure alcohol, rose 50 percent between 1965 and 1979, one of the highest rates of increase anywhere. Purchases of state-produced alcohol (not counting moonshine) were thought by the early 1980s to soak up 15 percent of total disposable income. The bottle is implicated in job absenteeism, in the majority of violent crimes, in many degenerative diseases, in the decline in fertility, and (due to poor quality control and the Russian habit of binge drinking) in thousands of deaths every year directly from alcohol poisoning.[45]

It is in the Soviet economy that individualism thrives in the most exotic mixture of revived and new forms. "The person," as Zaslavskaya put it in a searching analysis in 1980, "is not at all a bolt that can be snapped into a machine and forced to work there. He does not simply adjust to the system of economic relations. He also actively studies it, finds if necessary its weak spots, and tries wherever possible to use them."[46]

One manifestation of this is the withholding of prodigious amounts of money from circulation. Insofar as nominal incomes have outrun the supply of desired goods and services, the prices of most commodities have been frozen, and opportunities for legal investment are foreclosed by government policy, many Soviet consumers have not had a great deal of choice in this matter. But what discretion they have had has been exercised in favor of rounding out savings bank deposits and cash hoards in preference to buying more low-quality products from state stores. Accumulated savings, which were 20 percent of the population's money income in 1960 and 40 percent in 1970, were by 1982 equivalent to 70 percent of annual income and nearly 90 percent of all retail sales.[47] This bloated reserve of currency is a lien on future production, a reminder of popular disenchantment, and a disincentive to hard work—why worry about pleasing your boss if you have eight months' income stashed away with nothing in particular to spend it on? The problem had become serious enough to warrant mention by Gorbachev and other speakers at the Twenty-seventh Party Congress.

A related phenomenon is the personal stockpiling of scarce or potentially scarce commodities, a habit slowly fading in the Soviet Union until it gained new life in the mid-1970s. The upshot is artificial shortages: "So much pressure has been created in demand for certain goods that the purchaser is starting to take for a reserve up to fifteen or twenty pairs of nylons or stockings, large amounts of cloth and thread, etc. In such a situation, the consumer himself worsens the shortage."[48]

In human terms, a shortage is a collection of frustrated buyers, and this in turn is an invitation to sellers to come forward to meet the compressed demand. This is precisely what has occurred in the Soviet Union, where "colored markets" of every tint—black, grey, pink, and others recognized in the argot of the street—have by innumerable accounts swelled in recent years. In the official econ-

omy, there is more barter outside the plan, merging often into what the Soviets term *protektsiya,* or networks for exchanging non-pecuniary favors. More and more of the able and restless members of society, bumping up against the low ceiling on earnings set by wage egalitarianism and bored by the regimented life of the enterprise and trade union, shunt their efforts into the illegal "second economy," as Western analysts now call it (Soviets prefer the phrase "shadow economy"). Particularly in construction and agriculture, more managers count on free-lance laborers and craftsmen (*chastniki*) and itinerant work gangs (*shabashniki*) to help them meet their end-of-month production quotas. Frustrated consumers buy or trade for more of what they need *nalevo* (on the side) from friends, small-time producers and middlemen, sales clerks, waiters, and so on, most of whom depend to a considerable extent on materials purloined from store shelves or state warehouses and even on state vehicles and tools. Stolen and privately fabricated goods find ready buyers at inflated prices because, by Andropov's admission in 1983, state production is often so bad "that people prefer to overpay the speculator for articles that are good and made with taste."[49] Many find themselves in the position of the farmers in the Kharkov region of the Ukraine who paid large sums to private entrepreneurs to hook up their homesteads to natural gas mains—at the rate the state construction trust in charge was going it would have taken it 100 years to finish!—and then told a reporter that "they do not consider the 'on the side' gas mechanics to be criminals, and, more than that, they are sincerely grateful to them."[50]

Behavior deviant by traditional Soviet standards has also been on the ascent among officials, as numerous sources of information tell us. The economic slowdown of the 1970s and the unremitting pressure to meet production quotas spawned not only efforts to have plans scaled down, but a greater incidence of phony and padded reporting (*pripiska*) of economic results by managers. When the Procuracy (public prosecutor's office) of the USSR did a random check of enterprises in three industrial ministries in 1985—two and a half years after Brezhnev's death—it found inflated production statistics in 50 to 85 percent of the plants checked. This kind of deception, a press report said, "inspires alarm . . . [for] it has, alas, come to be widely practiced."[51] Such conduct, it is often pointed

out, has a demoralizing effect on the work force as a whole. "Where there is lack of correspondence between the visible, real results of production and the announced results, such as is completely obvious to the collective, this dispirits workers . . . negatively affects the attitude toward socialist property . . . stimulates the erosion of moral values."[52]

In as over-policed and bureaucratized a society as the Soviet Union, black market activity and fabrication of statistics could not exist without some connivance on the part of officials in law enforcement and general governmental roles. That cooperation surely was there, and was growing in scale, during the Brezhnev era. It was prevalent enough to have been described as the basis of a Brezhnev "Little Deal," tacitly accommodative of reciprocity systems as well as of petty private marketeering and corruption, equal to Stalin's "Big Deal" in importance.[53] Policemen, inspectors, procurators, the compilers of waiting lists for housing and consumer goods, party secretaries—many were willing, and some were downright eager, to look the other way in exchange for a bribe or the promise of future benevolence.

Members of the administrative elite had their own reasons under Brezhnev for bypassing official channels. They, too, had economic expectations that could not be met on the basis of salary and state stores alone, wives who bridled at standing in queues, sons and daughters wanting admission to the small number of university places. The expanding system of "special" or closed stores and service facilities helped plug the gap for many. Others crossed the boundary into personal and family enrichment through illegal means. They could only have been encouraged by Brezhnev's apparent nonchalance about the spread of corruption (symbolized for many by the preferential treatment afforded his own relatives), by the maxim of "respect for personnel," by lax policing, and by the Kremlin's reluctance to extend regional anti-corruption drives (such as the 1972 cleanup in Georgia) to the national level. They created a ready-made issue for Brezhnev's successors, who were able to proclaim, as Andropov did in 1983, that the bureaucrat or policeman on the take is striking "nothing less than a blow at the very essence of our system."[54]

Greater personal disengagement from common concerns is found in abundance in Soviet culture and the arts as well. Self-ab-

sorption, in distinct contrast to the socially engaged style of Khrushchev's time, became a compelling force in official culture in the 1970s. The most noticeable feature of Soviet literature, once devoted to preaching the virtues of collectivism, came to be "its preoccupation with private human concerns."[55] Novels, poetry, and plays dwelt on individual melancholy, fatigue, and solitude.

Parallel to the official culture, and communicating many of the same themes in less inhibited form, is the unofficial culture of the dissent movement. The sovereignty of the individual, expressed in the individual statement of moral opposition to the state, was a badge of most Soviet political dissent when it came of age under Brezhnev. Denied an open platform by party conservatives and the KGB, dissent went underground, finding outlets in such novel forms of expression as *samizdat* (private publication), *tamizdat* (publication of forbidden texts abroad), and, most recently, *magnitizdat* (tape recording of illicit material). Pulverized by the police, and subject to the same centrifugal tendencies found in Soviet society at large, dissent by the late Brezhnev period was more and more a disparate phenomenon, subject to "egoistic, chauvinistic, and xenophobic moods, . . . [to] a move away from concern about social problems . . . to a weariness and cynicism."[56]

The mixed blessings of minimal reforms. A final cause of the Soviet malady lies in the regime's preferred way of coping with its problems. The minimal reforms typical of the Brezhnev era, diffident and unhurried as they were, worked on balance to the benefit of the regime and the population. But they also engendered losses and irritations that new leaders are obliged to come to terms with one way or another.

Again it is the economy that drives the point home. Here the skin-deep revisions of structures and operating rules from the mid-1960s on were much less disruptive than the spasmodic renovations of the Khrushchev years. Yet, tinkering changes, followed by measures to fine-tune what were from the start inadequate measures, were by the late Brezhnev period "becoming a part of the problem, rather than contributing to its solution."[57] The leadership frequently resorted to local experiments, launched in one sector or place and then slowly extended elsewhere. While the pragmatic and consultative manner in which the pilot projects were formulated and executed was often preferred to past ways, the aggregate effect was to complicate the administration of the economy without much improving it. The experiments siphoned off time and energy into monitoring, reporting, and analysis. Most of them, after many dry runs, were not comprehensively introduced. The dozens of "targeted programs" added in the late 1970s and early 1980s aggravated the situation.

Many other of the creeping economic changes instituted under Brezhnev also had hidden costs, while at the same time falling short of the benefits they might have yielded had they been followed through more systematically. Transfer of foreign technology to Soviet industry is a case in point. It was shorn of much of its potential utility by self-imposed restrictions on "people transfer" and by an inability to forge incentives for Soviet industry to use imported equipment productively. Advanced Western machinery often clattered away in Soviet factories or field sites at one-third to one-half of its normal efficiency level. In the high-priority field of computers, Western export restrictions hurt Soviet interests, but equally damaging was the failure on the Soviet side to approximate the human and technical environment that enables effective use and continued development of computers in the West. Consequently, "The duplication of U.S. computer systems falls far short of ensuring the productive use of such systems."[58] Problems include political restrictions on information flow that preclude the emergence of a world-class user community and, on the mechanical side, the lack of proper ancillary equipment, storage media, electrical power, static-free communication lines, access to satellites, backup parts, servicing crews, and software.

The experience of the Soviet consumer sector sheds revealing light on the results of irresolute reforms. Agriculture excepted, the regime in the last two decades has attempted to satisfy popular demands for housing, soft and durable goods, and personal services without reallocating budgetary resources in any emphatic way. It has also shrunk from sanctioning private enterprise in the area or creating authoritative new state organizations able to do the job on their own. Instead, institutions with different missions entirely have been ordered to add consumer-directed work to their existing repertoires. Industrial construction trusts are obliged to build housing and kindergartens, truck factories and radar plants crank out re-

frigerators and televisions, and in some remote towns industrial enterprises operate bus and streetcar lines. Seeing these tasks as a distraction from their main business, established organizations do them with neither enthusiasm nor efficiency, and the ensuing potpourri of programs is weakly coordinated and the first to be harmed when something goes awry.

Production of consumer goods for private purchase, a sore point made more tender in the late Brezhnev years, is the best illustration. Soviet light industry plants, which manufacture mostly for the mass market, still find themselves at the end of the supply queue. The resultant slack in production is taken up by heavy industry (including the defense production ministries), which makes half of all non-food goods, among them all vehicles sold to the consumer and most home appliances. Years of exhortation have not annulled among the captains of heavy industry "the attitude that the production of articles for the consumer is something of secondary importance."[59] Subjected to little direction from above, they produce a jumble of models that are designed within individual plants, mutually incompatible, and frequently out of touch with consumer needs and tastes. They thus inflict upon the Soviet household no fewer than 130 refrigerator models (most of them outdated), 70 kinds of vacuum cleaners, 56 different television sets, 50 table radios, 40 sewing machines, and 34 electric razors. Economies of scale are rarely achieved because of the fragmentation of design and production. The Ministry of Trade, a bureaucratic pygmy compared to the industrial establishment, is notorious for accepting poor products from industry and passing them on to consumers, and only recently has it become more critical of its suppliers. Spare parts and servicing, for which neither the manufacturer nor the retailer accepts much responsibility in the Soviet Union, are left largely to unlicensed private entrepreneurs: "For years the discussion of the shortage of spare parts has gone on, but it is still apparent that they are available only from fast operators and profiteers."[60]

A uniquely perverse outcome has developed in the field of low-priced household goods, known in Soviet parlance as "goods of the simplest selection, not centrally planned." For about 85 percent of these approximately 3,000 items, central control consists solely of national planners in Gosplan assigning global quotas, reckoned in

rubles and not in physical units, to the industrial ministries, which are then given carte blanche to decide what to make and distribute. "No one," a trade official grumbled in 1982, "is occupied with coordinating the production of the whole range of the simplest commodities, and in this lies the source of many omissions and failures."[61] Salt has been rubbed in this old wound since the mid-1970s as executives, pressed to meet their basic plans, cut back arbitrarily on the manufacture of household goods. The bottom line being calculated in gross ruble terms, plant managers have often opted for larger, higher-priced items and produced fewer of the cheaper but often more necessary articles. This explains the recent proliferation of shortages of such inexpensive but irreplaceable consumer goods as paper products (of which there is a permanent shortage), tooth brushes, underwear and lingerie, baby blankets and diapers, low-wattage light bulbs, ink, glue, small bottles, aspirin, bandages, light footwear, needles and thread, inexpensive radios, kitchen utensils, ironing boards, axes, spades, garden hoses, wooden stools, key rings, hinges, bolts, shoe polish, electric switches, spark plugs, piston rings, typewriter ribbons, bath soap, and washing machine detergent. It is an object lesson, once again, in Soviet regression even as overall economic and social capacity continues to expand.

Minimal reforms with this result may be worse than no change at all. An individual might, after all, be philosophical about not owning a washing machine; when the machine he does own cannot be repaired or stands idle for lack of detergent, he is apt to be less forgiving. Such experiences fuel popular disillusionment, the underground economy, and demands for more responsive policies and structures.

The Danger of Crisis

What can be concluded about the seriousness and dynamics of Soviet miseries? One answer, offered by a fair number of observers in the West as the Brezhnev regime drew to an end, is that the USSR today is a society in crisis, that it has come to a turning point in which the very continuance of the Soviet order is at stake. This thesis, in my view, is invalid. It understates the rulers' resources and overstates their problems.

In cataloguing the leadership's worries, one must never lose sight of its strengths and assets. The Soviet system of government is closing out the seventh decade of its existence, making it one of the longest-lived and most firmly established of the world's political regimes. It has weathered more than its fair share of trials and shocks: civil war, forced-draft industrialization and the violent transformation of the countryside through collectivization, the great purges, invasion and occupation by Germany in a war with 20 million Soviet casualties, de-Stalinization, the overthrow of Khrushchev, the petrifaction of the late Brezhnev period. The resilience of Soviet power can hardly be doubted. It is based in large part on sturdy instruments of control—rule by a single party with a monopoly over personnel decisions, formal and informal censorship, a nationalized economy, political police and armed forces that possess nearly all weapons in the society, denial of free assembly, comprehensive political education, and the like—none of which shows signs of cracking. The telltale mark of a political system in mortal danger is violence, and political violence has been kept to a singularly low level in the Soviet Union. There have been impromptu strikes, the occasional street demonstration, a few aircraft hijackings, and scattered acts of terrorism. But little blood has been spilled, and the authorities have not had to strain to limit the fallout from such incidents. Among the forces aligned against the regime, there is barely a soul who either advocates its forcible overthrow or sees any realistic chance of this happening.[62]

The regime's solidity rests also on a record of positive achievement. Whatever its defects, it has made the country a world military power, safe for the first time from foreign invasion, the proprietor of an empire in Eastern Europe and the patron of far-off dependencies. It has thus been bound up in the public mind with Russian nationalism, an emotion which, as the case of Stalin proves, can also exert a hold on members of the society not of Russian ethnic origin. The regime has maintained order and facilitated the normal workings of a complex society over an immense and diverse territory. Its economic and scientific programs, at great sacrifice, have ferried peasant Russia into the space age. Industrialization and free public schooling have drawn millions of Soviets from humble backgrounds into rewarding professional and administrative careers. Cradle-to-grave social services and safeguards, expanded under

Brezhnev for rural dwellers, give Soviet citizens a security few would happily surrender. All told, the Communist Party's accomplishments represent a cache of political capital on which it can draw for some time.

Granted that it has been jarred by recent events, basic support for Soviet institutions has thus far not really been softened. As one thoughtful observer puts it, "there is no evidence that [the] perceived legitimacy of the system has lessened . . . among any but the relatively small contingent of dissidents and critically minded intellectuals." Much as there has been a welling up of pessimism, especially in the middle class, there is still a residue of optimism about the future, "a feeling that in the very long run things will turn out all right."[63] Preliminary results of the Soviet Interview Project, a massive survey of recent emigrants from the USSR to the United States, show a considerable degree of satisfaction with important regime norms even among individuals who voluntarily left the country. Fifty-two percent of the expatriates questioned, for example, strongly favored a system of state medicine such as exists in the Soviet Union, and 13 percent favored it somewhat; 38 percent fully endorsed public ownership of heavy industry, with 11 percent showing some approval; a good deal of support was also voiced for Soviet-type education, and a surprisingly large minority sympathized with the Soviet approach to criminal justice. Interestingly, the Soviet Interview Project is turning up many findings reminiscent of those of the Harvard Project, which polled several thousand refugees from Stalin's Soviet Union in the early 1950s.[64]

To help keep the recent failures of the Soviet regime in perspective, it must be remembered that many of them have been failures at the margin. Economic growth has been slowed, but the economy has not ceased to grow, let alone given indications of breaking down. There is a shortage of steak but not of bread, of stylish clothing but not of plain suits and work boots, of living space but not of basic shelter. Some Soviet problems would not have happened at all but for previous successes. The Stalinist economic model, for instance, would not be under scrutiny today had it not succeeded in promoting economic development to the point where the model is diminishing in effectiveness. There would be no ecological controversy in the Soviet Union if breakneck industrialization had not occurred, no mass striving for better careers and consumer goods if

state education and steady economic progress had not stoked popular expectations, and fewer infant deaths if Soviet doctors had not cut down on stillbirths.

Although the regime's difficulties are more plentiful and imposing than ten or twenty years ago, some problems are offsetting rather than mutually reinforcing. Think of the growing second economy. It is a source of corruption and in many ways a rival to the state economy for the loyalty and energies of Soviet citizens. It is also, however, a safety valve for the disaffected and a provider of goods and services not supplied by the state. In certain parts of the country, it may alleviate ethnic tensions as well. A new study of Uzbekistan, the most populous of the Moslem republics, concludes that the indigenous population draws major material benefit from its concentration in agriculture, services, and the light and food industries. Whereas Russians and other Europeans in Uzbekistan fill the leading positions in heavy industry and many of the professions, the Uzbeks themselves prefer to work in sectors well situated for crossover into individual enterprise, much of it illegal. Employment in the agricultural and services branches furnishes direct access to materials and products in short supply, which can then be traded in the underground economy, and in many cases allows earnings higher than those of the Russians. Extensive Uzbek participation in the second economy also "works to stifle the articulation of dissatisfaction in a direct political sense," in that those involved frequently circumvent or violate Soviet laws and can ill-afford to draw attention to themselves by making political demands.[65]

It is also instructive, before being carried away with the trouble the Soviets are in, to weigh their difficulties against those of other countries. The Soviet Union is far from alone in suffering from higher adult mortality rates and a widening gap between male and female life expectancy. It displays in an exaggerated form demographic symptoms found in a number of other developed societies.[66] On economic matters, it may be overdoing it to say, as does one American commentator, that talk of declining growth and structural problems in the USSR "could describe any country in the world."[67] Still, it is all too tempting in reciting the litany of Soviet woes to forget that the capitalist economies suffered from stagflation in the 1970s and deep recession in the early 1980s, that cash

wages in the United States (adjusted for inflation) are barely what they were ten years ago, and that there are more than 25 million men and women out of work in Western Europe and North America.

Making due allowance for its deficiencies, the USSR still possesses the second largest economy in the world (third by some measures, behind Japan as well as the United States). It leads all other countries in the production of steel, cement, and many types of chemicals and machinery. With giant reserves of natural gas, oil, coal, and hydropower, it has the most favorable long-term energy balance of any industrial power. The Politburo's headaches do not include, as those of the cabinets of the liberal democracies have lately, sky-high budget deficits, key industries ravaged by foreign competition, a wobbly international banking system, race riots, or separatist movements. The Soviet Union is not a society polarized along ethnic or socioeconomic fault lines, nor is the corruption and ineptitude of its political class at all comparable to that of a Ferdinand Marcos or a Jean-Claude Duvalier.

None of this is to make light of Soviet problems. They are legion, they are real, many of them are worsening, and they are having a cumulative effect. While the Soviet system has not arrived at the point of crisis, it clearly is headed in the wrong direction, raising the specter of grave trouble down the road. Some Soviet leaders guardedly conceded as much in the early 1980s. Writing in the party's theoretical journal in 1981, Konstantin Chernenko, then Brezhnev's closest confederate in the leadership, enjoined the party to recognize anew the importance of serving the "proper interests" of all segments of society. With Poland obviously in mind, he warned that otherwise, "our policy risks losing its firm social base, its support on the part of the masses." Poor analysis of social problems and disregard of the interests of particular classes and groups are, he said, "fraught with *the danger of social tension, of political and socioeconomic crisis.*"[68] Andropov several times struck a similar chord during his brief leadership. "It is necessary to pay dearly for one's mistakes in politics," he told the Central Committee in June 1983. "If the party's bond with the people is lost, into the resultant vacuum come self-styled pretenders to the role of spokesman for the interests of the working people"—an unmistakable allusion to Lech Walęsa and the Solidarity union.[69]

Which problems are most capable of shearing "the party's bond with the people"? Which will command priority attention because they have the potential of realizing the admitted danger of a general crisis of the Soviet system? For a problem to be critical in this sense, it must satisfy two criteria. First, it must be severe enough to affect the essential well-being of society and the cooperative relations among its members. Second, it must be urgent, calling for prompt action, as distinct from a condition that is stable or worsens only slowly.

Some of the problems on the Soviet agenda, while much more than trivial, fail to qualify as critical by the touchstone of severity. Genetic engineering, water and air pollution, traffic tie-ups, and city planning will agitate many officials and citizens in the years to come and be the subject of letters to the editor and learned conferences. They may act as well as a drain on resources needed to resolve more basic problems, as, say, concern over pollution does in relation to some kinds of industrial growth. But they are not so threatening as to force their way onto the leadership's core agenda. The problems of health care, bad as they may be, are also non-critical from a political perspective. The rise in mortality rates after the mid-1960s provoked little reaction at the time outside a restricted circle of administrators and experts. Equally important, the Soviets managed in the middle and late 1970s to stabilize the increase in death rates for one of the worst affected groups, infants, and to reverse the trend decisively in the Moslem republics and more moderately in the Baltic and Slavic areas.[70] Infant mortality was lessened by upgrading hospital maternity wards and clinics, enlarging the supply of qualified obstetricians and pediatricians, organizing more child care classes, improving the distribution of infant formula, and so forth. There can be little question that Soviet health standards in general can resume their historic upward movement. For this to happen, funds will have to be allocated to treatment, research, and prophylaxis, and this will require that health's share of the state budget, which gradually fell after 1965, rise once again. But we are speaking here of a straightforward matter of resources, not of system capacity.

Still other Soviet problems do not meet the test of urgency. This surely is true of most demographic issues. The regime will continue to grope for an "effective demographic policy," but no Soviet leader

in the 1980s is likely to give top priority to influencing through means of dubious reliability family-planning decisions that will not be reflected in manpower levels until after the turn of the century, long after he is out of power. The same holds for the reduction in opportunities for Soviet youth to enter desirable professional careers. Once any society has passed through the early stages of industrialization and the most prized occupational slots have been filled (and the children of the winners given a head start in competing for plum positions in the next generation), it is difficult if not impossible to retain the high rates of upward mobility realized at the outset. For the individuals involved, the problem may be severe; for the government, it cannot be urgent, for there is no tangible remedy short of upending other policies (such as career security for qualified incumbents). The 1984 amendments to Soviet elementary and secondary education seem to recognize the intractibility of the problem, which they deal with mostly by changes in the relative size of curriculum streams (in favor of vocational training at the expense of generalist education) seemingly aimed at reconciling youths from the lower classes to not entering university.

The Soviet Union's nationality problem is not so easily dismissed, yet here again it is important to keep the issue in perspective. Soviet ethnic relations are too often discussed by foreign observers in apocalyptic language, sometimes as if the Soviet multinational state were on the verge of collapsing like a house of cards. Careful reflection suggests this, too, is not a critically urgent problem. The Soviet regime has in the past been extraordinarily adept at using sticks and carrots to keep the non-Russian minorities pacified. Two or three generations into the future, population dynamics alone may make fundamental change inescapable. Over the next ten years or so, however, and even several decades beyond, the situation seems entirely manageable.

Russian hegemony in its present form is in no immediate peril for several reasons. The most important is that ethnic conflict will continue to be moderated by the same set of systemic constraints and buffers that help make the Soviet regime as a whole so stable—checks on communication, administrative and political controls, and the like.

In addition, crucial realities of the nationality issue itself will keep it well below the boiling point. First, demographic trends, dis-

tressing though they may be to the Russians, will leave them and their Slavic cousins numerically ascendant long into the twenty-first century. Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians will comprise about 65 percent of the USSR's population in 2000, three times the Moslem proportion.

Second, political leverage will not automatically spring from demographic growth. Political power is an independent Russian resource. Control over the Soviet state and Communist Party will be used to ensure that as much power as possible is passed on to future Russians.

Third, the dominant Russians will go on enjoying the advantage of territorial and political coherence and centrality. The ethnic minorities will remain on the periphery, penetrated by large Russian settler communities (24 million Russians lived outside the RSFSR in 1979, making up almost a fifth of the population there), relatively remote from one another (and in some instances hostile to one another), and able in most cases to communicate with one another only in Russian.

Fourth, there is reason to believe that the region that poses the greatest demographic challenge—Central Asia—will long remain receptive to Soviet rule. This is primarily because of government policies, among them modernization of the economy and of social services (especially successful when compared to neighboring Asian countries), Soviet tolerance of native traditions (including Islam), and leniency toward the indigenous second economy. The vast majority of Soviet Central Asians seem content with the regime and would find the arguments of an Ayatollah Khomeini, which have wreaked such havoc across the Iranian border, "very difficult . . . to understand, let alone endorse."[71]

Fifth, Moscow will have the opportunity of carrying forward the one great success of nationality policy under Brezhnev: Russian-language training. Between 1970 and 1979, the proportion of non-Russians knowing Russian as a first or second language rose from 49 to 62 percent; the ratio is much higher among urban residents and younger people and in republics, such as Uzbekistan, where it was given a high priority by the local leadership. Bilingualism, in which members of other ethnic groups are able to function in Russian for economic and other state purposes, without relinquishing their particular identity, may very well be the cornerstone of the Soviet nationality policy of the future, and it will be building on solid past successes. The intensified teaching program unveiled in the late 1970s and affirmed in 1983 should keep the trend in train.

There is an item on the Soviet agenda that is sufficiently severe and urgent to be truly critical, one that could lead to a general crisis of the regime. That is the problem to which this chapter has repeatedly turned for examples—the problem of the economy. For the Soviet Union, the central question of the 1980s and 1990s is that of its sputtering economic engine and of the social ramifications of economic stagnation.

Economic difficulties are the most common precipitant of trauma and change in politics. In well-nigh all industrial societies today, economic and socioeconomic issues dominate political discourse. The Soviet Union is no different: elite and mass opinion alike take it as a given that economic and related problems are and will remain of overriding importance. The regime's rhetoric, action program, and deepest anxieties all revolve around the economy. The population, for its part, sizes up the state today more than ever by how it delivers material goods and services. And no section of the establishment, no matter how coddled, has been insulated from economic stringency. Even Soviet military officers, traditionally a privileged group, were reported in the late Brezhnev period to be "forced to become nervous and to waste valuable time waiting in queues" for food. According to another report in the military press, underinvestment and poor personnel practices in the army's retailing network had bred bad services, spoiled goods, and "interruptions in supply," with hoarding and black markets as a consequence. All these "call forth justified indignation on the part of the residents of the garrisons."[72]

Furthermore, the health of the economy has a direct bearing on many of the non-economic issues facing the Soviet system. Prized foreign policy goals are implicated, as has been more emphasized in recent Soviet discussions, since military competitiveness and the international prestige of Soviet-style socialism are harder to sustain with a sluggish economy. The weapons systems of the armed forces, the principal vehicle for projecting Soviet power abroad, depend increasingly on technologies coming out of civilian science and industry and not just out of the nine defense production minis-

tries: new materials and alloys, hardware and software for communications and data processing, manufacturing and miniaturizing techniques, directed energy, and the like.

At home, almost all major interests would be poorly served by continuing economic malaise. Soviet communists have been no less inclined than American liberals to see economic growth as a surrogate for painful, redistributive choice among competing priorities. The worse the economy does, the more those conflicts—guns versus butter, schools versus hospitals, the holders of jobs versus the aspirants to jobs—have to be sorted out and defused. The more also ethnic harmony will be injured, for retarded growth in an unreformed Soviet economy would aggravate both the rivalry for jobs between natives and Russians in the non-Russian republics and the competition for investment funds that pits region against region. Unless economic productivity and growth prospects are improved in the built-up Slavic and Baltic republics, the manpower shortage will present the regime with two options either of which is likely to inflame ethnic relations: involuntary importation of millions of Central Asian workers into the European USSR and Siberia, which could both anger the Central Asians and create ethnic ghettos in Slavic cities; or, equally unpalatable, redirection of new investment and maybe even existing industrial plant into the Moslem regions.

It is on economic and socioeconomic issues that the gap between regime performance and popular expectations has grown most dangerously in recent years. There are no grounds whatever for the Kremlin hoping that the present economic crunch will prove to be transitory and that developments a few years hence will ring in new and easy prosperity. Arable land, capital, raw materials, energy, labor—all the abundant and cheap grist that once fed the mill of extensive economic growth has become scarce and expensive, and will only become more so as the 1980s give way to the 1990s.

To make matters worse, the Soviets by the early 1980s were the victims in economic policy of several vicious circles, that is to say, of negative trends that feed on themselves. Three stand out. One is the contribution of inadequate incentives to poor work motivation and, therefore, to low productivity, which in turn reduces the total available for rewards. A second vicious circle is built around the substitution of private for public responses to economic needs. This

spins off worlds of activity not under the regime's direct control and at variance with its values. A third stems from the investment crunch beginning in the late 1970s. A capital goods glutton for half a century, the Soviet economy was put on a diet because the economic growth that sustained new investment was wavering and the Brezhnev Politburo was unwilling to rank investment ahead of maintenance of levels of mass consumption and military spending. With the emergency need for investment in oil and natural gas development further tightening the bind, the Soviet leaders were, in the opinion of many analysts, heavily mortaging future economic growth.[73]

To sum up: the agenda of Soviet politics is indeed a cluttered and a disquieting one. The combination of the resurgent problems of neglect and the novel problems of success, dwindling payoffs to old solutions, the accentuation of ethnic tensions, the inability of the regime to meet rising expectations, social atomization in such forms as corruption and the second economy, the failures of faint-hearted reforms—all are of concern, and all are harbingers of more trouble ahead. The Soviet system is not yet in crisis, but unless its new leaders can brake downward trends, especially in the economy, the day cannot be put off indefinitely when it will be.