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Moscow's Brand of Mercy

"Amnesty and Pardon in the Soviet Union" by Zigurds L. Zile, in *Soviet Union* (vol. 3, part 1, 1976), Publications Office, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15260.

More than 180 general amnesties for criminals have been declared by the Soviet Union since the first was proclaimed at the Sixth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in 1918. Only nine have come since Stalin's death in 1953. How many people have been affected by these actions is not known, but it seems clear that amnesties play an important role in Soviet penal policy. Yet, observes Zile, a University of Wisconsin political scientist, no *precise* definition of amnesty appears anywhere in Soviet law.

Apart from Moscow's insistence that amnesty is merely "an expression of socialist humanism," Zile notes, the sketchy available facts will support almost any interpretation. Some amnesties seem to be public-relations moves. To celebrate International Women's Year, for example, the Kremlin freed large numbers of female convicts. But novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn claimed (in *Gulag Archipelago*) that, in at least one instance, amnesty served as a device to flush out potential dissidents: Cossacks responding to an amnesty offer were first given land, then arrested. Finally, Peter Maggs of the University of Illinois says that Soviet amnesties are simply granted "when prisoner detention facilities become overcrowded."

Ordinary criminals are the main beneficiaries. "Politicals" were excluded from both the amnesty of 1967, celebrating the October Revolution's 50th anniversary, and the two amnesties of 1975. "Soviet amnesty policy," Zile suggests, "distributes the rations of mercy in ways designed to condition human beings in the unquestioning acceptance of the established order."

A Bitter Pill

"The Great Pill Push" by Iain Guest, in *The New Internationalist* (Mar. 1977), 113 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201.

Faced with dwindling food supplies, endemic disease, and an "unacceptably high" birthrate, the government of Bangladesh embarked on a major population control effort shortly after the nation achieved independence from Pakistan in 1972.

With funds from the United States, the United Nations, and others, economic incentives have been devised to encourage family planning.

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Thousands of sterilizations have been performed and contraceptives have been provided for those who want them. The United States alone has given Bangladesh over 50 million cycles of oral contraceptives since 1972. During one week in 1975, volunteers distributed birth control pills and condoms in two-thirds of the nation's 65,000 villages.

However, argues correspondent Iain Guest, the intensity of the drive has not been matched by its results. Bangladesh has yet to recover from a civil war and two coups in five years. Bureaucratic fragmentation has crippled distribution services; funds are held up by administrative rivalry; allegations of fraud and incompetence are widespread. Lacking instruction, most women haven't used the birth control pills that they received. Those who are using them are misusing them. And because women become more fertile immediately after ceasing to take estrogen, those unable to get pills every month are likely to conceive in the interim.

Worse yet, the government has ignored the connection between family planning and health care. Thirty percent of Bangladeshi children die before the age of five, notes Guest; since working children are economically vital to rural families, parents who undergo sterilization, as urged by officials, in effect "act against their own best interests." Moreover, if the children of a sterilized woman die, her husband may simply take a new, fertile wife. According to Guest, Bangladeshi officials now fear that the birth control program may actually have *increased* the country's annual population growth rate by half a percent since 1974.

Three Reports on the New Vietnam

"Vietnam Since Reunification" by William S. Turley, in *Problems of Communism* (Mar.-Apr. 1977), Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; "Gulag Vietnam?" by Allen E. Goodman, in *Freedom at Issue* (Mar.-Apr. 1977), 20 W. 40th St., New York, N.Y. 10018; "They Are Us, Were We Vietnamese" by Theodore Jacqueney, in *Worldview* (Apr. 1977), 170 E. 64th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Two years after Hanoi's tanks rolled into Saigon, its durable Politburo is still wrestling with the grave problems of postwar recovery and the "social transformation" of the conquered South.

Roughly \$1 billion in foreign aid, half of it from the Soviet Union, buttressed the thin \$2.6 billion national budget of the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam last year; with 43 million inhabitants, Vietnam is now the world's third largest Communist nation. Turley, Southern Illinois political scientist, cites official plans: a "redistribution" of 4 million people out of urban areas by 1980; use of army technicians on economic projects; a stress on light industry in the North and farming