



BREZHNEV'S PEOPLE

Scenarios, statistics, and theories abound in U.S. discussions of the Soviet Union. But such abstract (and often abstracted) information cannot fully convey what it is like to live in Soviet society. The *Wilson Quarterly* invited John Glad, a specialist in Slavic literature, to fill out the picture with illustrative excerpts from recent Russian fiction. Three of Professor Glad's choices—those by Natalya Baranskaya, Arkady Arkanov, and Fyodor Abramov—first appeared in Soviet publications. The current regime allows *some* criticism. The contemporary Soviet writer can portray some of the difficulties of Soviet life without being shipped off to a labor camp. Yet more than a few attitudes, ideas, and subjects—the secret police, or KGB, is a notable example—are still taboo. Thus our first piece, by émigré Ilya Suslov, which not only mentions but actually belittles the KGB, would never get past a Soviet censor.

Visiting the West

Born in 1933, Ilya Suslov achieved fame in the USSR as editor of "The Club of the Twelve Chairs," the popular humor section of The Literary Gazette. Suslov emigrated to the United States in 1974. Here, he takes a wry look at that most precious of Soviet privileges, travel to the West:

I had a girlfriend who worked in the Beryozka Dance Troupe. The troupe was frequently sent abroad to bring back hard currency, so the discipline had to be ironclad.

"What place did you like most of all?" I once asked my friend.

"We never saw anything," she said. "We were always on the road, rehearsing, or giving performances. We only got \$10 a day for expenses, and we had to eat three times a day on that and save up enough to buy junk we could sell on the black market."

"How'd you manage that?"

"We always brought the biggest suitcases available. On the way over, we'd pack them with sugar, salt, cookies, sausage, canned goods, concentrates, tea, soap, coffee — everything we needed to survive and be able to save money. And on the way back, we stuffed them with blouses (our building was even called the 'blouse house'), watches, dresses, suits, sheepskin coats, pantyhose. A person could live real well on the earnings. You know how foreign things sell."

"Okay, suppose you're on tour for a month and you don't eat anything. Ten dollars a day is only \$300. What can you buy for \$300?"

"Sales!" my friend said. "You can't imagine the kind of sales they have in the West! They would take us to special stores where everything was virtually free. The items might have been out of style for them for two or three years, but for us it was still the wave of the future. Just look at this woman's watch. I bought it for \$1.50, but I'll sell it for 80 rubles. They'll tear my hand off to get it."

"But at that rate you could kick the bucket from hunger. Just look at yourself after that trip — nothing but skin and bones."

"So what!" my friend answered. "As long as there's bones, you can always put on the meat. Look, I'm not a beggar, and I'm not a prostitute. The girls in our troupe get 79 rubles a month—the price of a pair of shoes. Who can live on that? And the money I've saved up from these tours has been enough to buy an apartment and a car. And I dress like a human being. . . ."

She said that they had stopped in a small hotel in Switzerland. That night, the lights in the hotel went out just before the performance. Then they went out again. The manager got all upset and sent for Nadezhdin, the head of the troupe. He said that if the fuses blew one more time, he'd kick the whole Ber-yozka troupe onto the street. It turned out that the lights were off because the girls were all plugging in their heating elements at the same time. They wanted some tea before the performance.

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As for ironclad discipline, that turned out to be a simple thing. They just announced that on the next trip abroad, only 80 people would be sent instead of 100. And the girls really put out an effort. Party headquarters were deluged with denunciations; all the girls were trying to curry favor and be included in that cherished list. They wrote that Pavlova had left the hotel in the evening on the last tour, even though that was not permitted. They wrote that Sidorova and Petrova went to a department store, even though Vasil Vasilich said that was off limits. "Vasil Vasilich" was the name used for all the KGB men accompanying the troupe during the trip. Officially, they had all kinds of jobs—balalaika player, stage worker, administrative assistant. They were all called "Vasil Vasilich," and they didn't even mind responding to the name; why not?

The Beryozka Dance Troupe was an outstanding success. Foreigners loved it and constantly invited it to go on tour.

A Day Like Any Other

Natalya Baranskaya, a historian and ethnologist, graduated from Moscow University in 1930 but did not publish until 1968, when she earned sudden celebrity with "One Week Like Any Other." This matter-of-fact account of a two-paycheck middle-class family struck a chord with Soviet women, whose burdens (cramped apartments, long shopping queues, unhelpful husbands) far exceed those of their American sisters:

I just can't wake up. I feed Dmitry's palm on my back as he shakes me.

"Olga, Olga, sweetie, wake up. You'll be running around again like a chicken without a head."

I finally really do wake up. I make it to the bathroom, where I wash up and bury my face in a warm Turkish towel, nearly fall asleep for a half-second, and wake up with the words: "To hell with all of it!"

But all that is nonsense. There is no one and nothing to send to hell, and everything is fine and beautiful. We got an apartment in a new building. The children are wonderful, Dmitry and I love each other, and I have an interesting job. Who or what would I want to see in hell? Nonsense!

At work, I run into Yakov Petrovich on the third-floor stairway.

"You won't be late with your experiment, Olga Petrovna?"

I blush and say nothing in my confusion. Of course, I could say: "No, of course not." It would be best to do that. But I

remain silent. How can I be sure?

"In view of your interest in your work and . . . um-m-m . . . your ability, we agreed to transfer you to the vacant slot for a junior researcher and include you in a group working on an interesting problem. But I have to tell you that we are a little disturbed . . . um-m-m . . . surprised that you aren't conscientious enough in fulfilling your obligations."

I am silent. I love my work. I treasure the fact that I can work independently. It doesn't seem to me that I'm not conscientious. But I am frequently late—especially on Mondays. What can I say? I just hope this is only a normal chewing out and nothing more. I mutter something about icy sidewalks and snowdrifts, the bus that always arrives at our stop already packed, the crowds. . . . And with a sickening nausea I realize I have said the same things the other times.

Back at the lab, a heated discussion is raging with regard to point five of a questionnaire: "If you have no children, underline the reason: medical grounds, financial reasons, family situation, personal considerations, etc."

I don't see any point in arguing when all you have to do is underline "personal considerations" and move on to the other questions. I would even underline "etc." But point five has caught everybody's interest, even pricked the vanity of those women who have no children.

The comments come thick and heavy: "Some people let animal instinct run their minds." "People with no children are simply selfish." "They ruin their own lives." "Well, it remains to be seen—just whose life is ruined." "And who's going to pay you your pension if there's no young generation to replace us?" "The only real women are those who can bear children." There was even a remark: "Anyone who put her head in a noose should shut up."

I remember we didn't want a second child. Our boy, Kotka, wasn't even a year-and-a-half old when I realized I was pregnant again. Horrified, I cried and registered for an abortion. But it was a different feeling this time than with Kotka. It was better and different in general. I mentioned it to an older woman at the clinic who was sitting next to me in the waiting room and was taken completely aback when she replied: "That's not because it's your second, but because it's a girl." I got up and went straight home, where I told Dmitry that I was going to have a girl and that I didn't want any abortion. He was outraged: "How can you listen to that absurd chatter?" He kept trying to persuade me to forget this nonsense and go back to the clinic.

But I believed it would be a girl and even began to dream of

*Image versus reality,
Soviet-style. He smokes,
drinks pivo (beer) and
watches television,
while she works, shops,
walks baby, and cleans.*



From Krokodil, 1980.

her. She had fair hair and blue eyes like Dmitry's. (Kotka took after me with his brown hair and dark eyes.) The little girl would run around in a short dress, shake her curly head, and rock her doll. Dmitry got very angry when I told him of my dreams, and we had a quarrel.

Finally, the last day arrived for us to make the decision, and we thrashed things out. I said: "I don't want to kill my daughter just to make our lives easier." And I burst into tears. "Alright, alright, but stop that bellowing, you idiot. If you want another baby, go ahead. But you'll see — it'll be another boy." Then, abruptly, Dmitry stopped talking, stared at me silently for a long time, slammed his palm against the table top, and resolved: "It's decided: Just stop bellowing and arguing." And he hugged me. "But you know, Olga, a second boy isn't so bad either. Kotka will have someone to play with." But it was a girl, Gulka, fair-haired, and absurdly similar to Dmitry. . . .

Getting home is no easy thing. I'm carrying two heavy bags with everything but vegetables. I have to stand in the subway, holding one bag in my arms and keeping the other between my feet. It's crowded and everybody is pushing, so there's no chance to even try to read. Mentally, I count up how much I've spent. It always seems to me that I've lost some of my money. I had two 10-ruble notes, but now only some loose change is left. There should be 3 rubles left over. I recount everything and go through the purchases in the two bags. The second time, I come to the conclusion that I have lost 4 rubles. I give up and begin to look at the passengers who are seated. Many are reading. The young women are reading books and magazines, and the better-dressed men have newspapers. A fat man is reading a humorous magazine, but his face is morose. The young men look away,

squinting lazily, so they won't have to give up their seats.

Finally, at Sokol Station, everyone leaps to his feet and rushes toward the narrow stairway. With my packages of milk and eggs, however, I have to bring up the rear. When I reach the bus station, the line is big enough to fill up six buses. Maybe I should try to squeeze into one of the full buses? But how about my bags? Nevertheless, I try to get on the third bus, but the bags in my arms don't permit me to grab onto anything; my foot slips off the high step, and I fall painfully on my knee. Precisely at this moment, the bus begins moving. Everyone is shouting, and I squeal. The bus stops, a man standing near the door pulls me in, and I lean into my bags. My knee aches, and I undoubtedly have an omelet in the one bag. But someone gives me his seat, and I can survey the damage to my knee and torn stocking smeared with blood and dirt.

When the bus reaches my stop, I rush home, the grocery bags bouncing against my aching knee. I just hope that Dmitry didn't let the children stuff themselves on bread and that he remembered to start the potatoes.

I knew it—the children are eating bread. Dmitry has forgotten everything and is engrossed in a technical journal. I light all the burners and put on the frying pan and the tea pot. In 20 minutes, we sit down to a meal of meat patties and potatoes.

We eat a lot. It's the first time I've really eaten that day. Dmitry is also hungry after a skimpy meal in the cafeteria. God only knows how the children ate.

The children grow sleepy from the hot heavy meal and support their chins with their little fists. Sleep is written all over their faces. I have to drag them under the stream of warm water in the bathroom, put them to bed, and they are already asleep at nine.

Dmitry returns to the table. He likes to drink his tea leisurely, look through the paper, read a book. But I have to wash the dishes and then the children's clothing. Kotka's leggings have to be darned; he's constantly wearing them out at the knees. I prepare their clothing and put Gulka's clothes in a bag. By that time, Dmitry brings me his overcoat; he lost a button in the crowded subway. Then, the kitchen has to be swept and the garbage has to be taken out. That's Dmitry's job.

I wake up in the middle of the night with a feeling of anxiety. I don't know why. I lie on my back with my eyes open. I can hear the heating pipes sighing in the silent night and the loud ticking of the upstairs neighbors' wall clock. The same time being evenly measured by their pendulum is being frantically ticked away by our alarm clock.

The Savior's Graffiti

The elaborate Church of the Savior on the Blood was erected on the spot in Leningrad where a revolutionary's bomb felled Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Closed during the 1917 revolution, it is now undergoing restoration and will eventually be reopened as a museum. Both believers and nonbelievers express their hopes and thoughts by penciling graffiti on the sides of the church. Some examples collected by John Glad:

"Lord, grant me luck, and help me to be accepted into the Art Academy in four years."

"Happiness and health to me and Volodya."

"Lord strangle Taritsyn!"

"Lord, help me get rid of Valery!"

"Lord, help me in love!"

"Lord, make Charlotte fall in love with me!"

"Lord, I'm hungry!"

"Lord, help me pass the exam in political economics!"

"Lord, help me pass the exams in: 1) electrical technology, 2) E.V.I. (Electrical Vacuum Instruments), 3) Marxism-Leninism. Pi. . . ." (Signature illegible.)

"Help me pass my driver's license test, Lord."

"Lord, help me pass the entrance examinations to LVXPU" (the Leningrad Higher Institute of Art and Industry). Added by another person: "Me too."

"Lord, take the arrogance out of my wife."

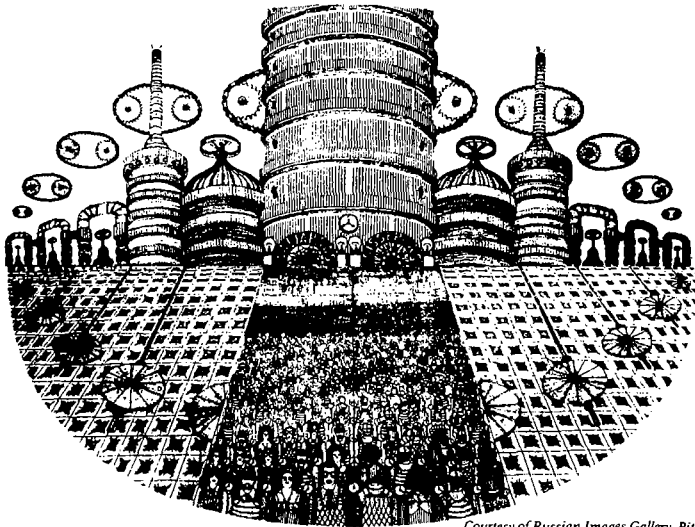
"Lord, help me win a transistor radio, model AP-2-14, in the lottery." Added on by another person: "All we have is P-201. Archangel Gabriel."

3×3 = 1,812

The distortions inflicted on Soviet life by the production quotas of the Plan are here taken to the absurd extreme by satirist Arkady Arkanov, 47, who has remained in favor in the Soviet Union, where he is on the staff of The Literary Gazette:

In the new director's office, everything was the same, but it had nevertheless changed.

The old director's desk had been on the right; the new director's desk was on the left. The safe had been on the left earlier, but now it was on the right. The new director was in a



Courtesy of Russian Images Gallery, Pittsburgh.

Estonian artist Vinn Vello's etching, The Shift (1977), portrays one crew of workers emerging from a factory as the next crew enters.

no-nonsense mood: "Why is your factory producing so few jar lids?"

"You see. . . ."

"I believe you are the chief engineer and have a Ph.D. in mathematics?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"That means: algebra, a^2 , b^2 We know a thing or two around here too. . . . So. . . . We're going to work differently from now on! No more of that old-fashioned fiddling around. . . . Am I right?"

"Well, yes," I agreed, still not understanding what was up.

He smiled, pleased to have found an ally.

In his new office, the new director had the free manner of a man who had been born and raised there.

"So . . ." he proceeded, smacking his lips over every word.

"We're going to eliminate the main cause of our difficulties. We're going to dispose of the old-fashioned multiplication table."

I laughed, delighted to see that our new director had a sense of humor. He waited till I had finished laughing and continued: "I have carefully acquainted myself with the multiplication table and have come to the conclusion that the former figures have become antiquated and are restraining us from moving forward in a truly aggressive fashion. . . ."

I was beginning to take a real liking to this new director.

"I would like to make a suggestion in this regard," I said with a laugh. "Let's have 2 times 2 be 9, 3 times 3 be 34, and 5 times 5 be 81."

"I doubt that that would be sufficient," he said, blowing his nose. "I've made some preliminary calculations."

The director drew a sheet of paper from his desk and handed it to me. It was covered with all sorts of figures.

The sheet contained a new multiplication table: $2 \times 2 = 67$; $3 \times 3 = 1,812$; $6 \times 7 = 2,949$. The last column contained only 12-digit numbers.

I glanced at the director in a distracted fashion. He was staring at me with triumphant eyes.

"How do you like 3 times 3 equals 1,812? What do you say?"

"Isn't that sort of going overboard?" I asked with a weak smile.

"Maybe. But it is bold! But you're a scientist, and you can work out the details. Have it back in my office in a week for me to sign."

Death on the Collective Farm

Associated with neither the Kremlin "establishment" nor the dissidents, 60-year-old novelist Fyodor Abramov is an independent voice, best known for his blunt, gloomy depictions of rural life. In this excerpt, Pelageya is the widow of the farmworker Pavel:

All of Pavel's near and distant relatives had arrived at the collective farm to see him off on this, his last journey. As might have been expected, they were almost all country folk. But there was also a cousin from the city, an uncle-pensioner from a forest town, and a nephew who was an officer in the Army and who had flown in for the funeral.

Everyone was there except his beloved daughter, Alka, who had fled, pregnant, to the city.

Pavel had died on the third day following his daughter's flight from home, and no one knew where to search for her. Fragments of whispered gossip reached Pelageya's ears as she stood at the feet of the dead man: "That's the way children are nowadays. . . . They're ready to bury their own parents alive. . . . You raise them—and that's your reward. . . ."

Pavel was buried old-style and new-style.

At home, everything was done as such things had always been done. And the chairman of the collective farm didn't interfere. While the old women were burning incense around the coffin and droning "Holy God," the chairman of the collective farm and his assistant smoked out on the street. At one point, the veterinarian, Afonka, came rushing into the hut, shouting drunkenly for them to stop making a mockery of a man who had been a real bolshevik even if he wasn't a party member. But they got rid of him in a hurry. The chairman himself. Just pushed him out of the hut.

The new rites began at the cemetery when they started making speeches over the open coffin:

"A dedicated worker. . . . From the very beginning. . . . Honest. . . . A model for all of us. . . . We'll never forget. . . ."

It was then that Pelageya lost control of herself. She had endured everything: the wailing, the condemnation in her neighbors' eyes for not having taken better care of Pavel, their whispered gossip. Immobile as stone beside the coffin, she had endured it without so much as gesture or even a sigh. But when the speeches began, the earth lurched beneath her feet.

"A dedicated worker. . . . From the very beginning. . . . Honest. . . . A model for all of us. . . ."

Pelageya listened to those words and suddenly thought: It was true—every last word. Pavel had worked in the farm without ever refusing—like a horse or a machine. He had even fallen ill at work. They brought him from threshing on a cart. And who appreciated his work while he was alive? Had anyone even thanked him? The chairman? She, Pelageya?

No. The truth had to be spoken: She had always regarded her husband's work [on the collective farm] as worthless. How could anyone value work for which there was no payment?



EDITOR'S NOTE: *Ilya Suslov's piece is taken from the author's manuscript; Natalya Baranskaya's is from Novy mir, no. 11, 1969; Arkady Arkanov's is from The Club of the Twelve Chairs (Moscow, 1974); and Fyodor Abramov's is from The Selected Works of Fyodor Abramov (Moscow, 1975).*