SOVIET PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN THE AGE OF *PERESTROIKA*

By Richard Dobson and John P. Robinson

Sociology has always had a difficult time in the Soviet Union. Under Stalin, the Communist Party (CPSU) branded it a "bourgeois pseudo-science" and suppressed it. From the late 1950s, when Nikita Khrushchev began to rehabilitate sociology, the party continued to limit its autonomy. The CPSU sought to use research for "communist construction" and other political purposes, while subordinating it to Marxist-Leninist ideology. Today sociology's status is changing. Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* provide a freer and more supportive climate for social research. Here we review long-standing problems with Soviet opinion research and then assess recent developments. The field still suffers as Soviet social science attempts to throw off the historical constraints of political control, fear and distrust, and poor methodology.

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The Old Order

Political interference. Party and government officials have historically used polls to demonstrate that decisions taken by the leadership enjoyed popular support, that citizens subscribed to Marxist-Leninist beliefs, and that "things are getting better and better." Authorities prevented scholars from exploring a wide range of politically sensitive subjects. Official constraints also applied to the publication of research findings. Often only "positive" results saw the light of day. Negative findings were presented sparingly and selectively, so that readers had to read between the lines to get a more realistic view. As Tat'iana Zaslavskaia, a prominent sociologist (see below), and other scholars have pointed out, the party effectively banned publication of even basic census information, not to mention data on drug addiction and worker alienation.[1]

Fear and distrust. Surveys have been regarded with suspicion. Government bureaucracy generally saw them as "provocative," fearing their results might be embarrassing. Some managers alleged that sociologists intentionally "prompted" people to complain about food in the stores or public transportation.[2] Despite assurances of anonymity, many citizens rightly feared they might be identified and punished for holding unorthodox views. Some refused to answer the questions, but more gave "suitable" (politically safe) answers. In 1987, when pollsters from the unofficial group Friendship and Dialogue asked Muscovites their views on human rights, many replied, "Why do you need to know public opinion?," "Who's behind you?," or "This is a provocation!" One stated simply, "I answer, and I will be imprisoned."[3]

Zaslavskaia notes that Soviet authorities generally deprived their citizens of information and discouraged them from participating in political life. On many issues, public opinion simply did not exist. Many citizens not only gave little thought to what others were thinking, but did not even form their own opinions.[4] It was better for citizens not to have an opinion, much less to express it.

Validity of the responses. Researchers typically got samples from selected factories or other enterprises and then polled a certain number of workers at each. Often, bosses summoned workers to an auditorium or "Red Corner" for a mass exercise in questionnaire completion. It was doubtful, to put it mildly, that one could legitimately generalize the findings to any larger population.

A New Polling Atmosphere

Glasnost has expanded the boundaries of legitimate inquiry. Scholars can now investigate many issues previously off-limits and publish the results. In the spring of 1988, for instance, *Moscow News* conducted a poll on official privileges that would have been inconceivable a few years ago: It showed a large majority of the Muscovites opposed most such privileges.[5] Recently, the party has taken measures to broaden and improve sociological research. In March 1988, for example, the All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion on Social and Economic Questions was established under the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions and the USSR State Committee for Labor and Social Problems. From all indications, it will become the USSR's leading polling institution, capable of conducting periodic national surveys. A June 1988 CPSU Central Committee resolu-

tion said it was necessary "to raise the development of Marxist-Leninist sociology to a qualitatively new level." The resolution called for more sociological research and for the establishment of sociology faculties at major universities.

Meanwhile, the sheer quantity of polls has increased dramatically. They are now being conducted by party organizations, research institutes, newspapers, and even unofficial groups. Such newspapers as *Trud*, *Izvestiia, Argumenty i fakty,* and *Moscow News* regularly report survey results. Party organizations at all levels poll party members and regular citizens. For example, the party's Academy of Social Sciences has conducted large-scale studies of opinions about *perestroika*. The public opinion center under the Georgian Communist Party Central Committee has explored opinion on issues ranging from crime to reactions to the film "Repentance."

Leading polling facilities. Of the various academic institutions that conduct polls, two Moscow institutions are especially prominent. One is the public opinion center set up in 1985 at the Institute of Sociology. The center conducts polls on both domestic issues and foreign affairs. It has also done contract work for foreign firms (French, Japanese, and American), including CBS News/*New York Times*, Gallup and Marttila and Kiley. The Center conducted the first joint US-USSR research project with the University of Maryland, and is currently planning further joint academic surveys with the Universities of Chicago, Michigan, Wisconsin, and California (Berkeley).[6] The second is the All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion, headed by Tat'iana Zaslavskaia. It has created a network of 23 (out of 25 planned) regional offices across the country to conduct periodic surveys at the national level.

The execution of national surveys presents far greater difficulties in the USSR than in the US and other countries. First, there is the vastness of the country (stretching across 11 time zones). Add to this the rudimentary and frail transportation and communications technology that connects it. More important still are the formidable ethnic and language differences that make the application of standardized questions with common meaning to respondents in Moscow, Ashkhabad, and Khabarovsk extremely problematic. Experience in conducting surveys also varies across the country, with the most sophisticated facilities and personnel generally being found in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. (Other free-standing research institutes are found in Belorussia, Turkmenistan, Georgia, and the Ukraine.)[7]

Leading scholars. Several strong proponents of sociological research have risen to commanding positions, not just in the academic community, but also in national political life. Foremost among them is Zaslavskaia, a member of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the president of the Soviet Sociological Association. She authored the famous 1983 "Novosibirsk report" that presaged Gorbachev's reforms. Her deputy at the center is Boris Grushin. He played the leading role in developing Soviet polling in the 1960s and 1970s. He established the first post-war polling center at the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda*. The Komsomol closed the center when he undertook a study of young people's attitudes toward the Komsomol, a subject deemed too daring for study. Grushin later headed an opinion research center at the Institute of Sociological Research—closed by the authorities in the Seventies after he conducted a study of opinion on the election of managers. A third major figure is Aleksandr Yadov, named director of the Institute of Sociology last summer. Yadov did pioneering work in the 1960s on workers' attitudes. He has long enjoyed the respect of his peers for his professionalism and fierce independence. All three scholars are ardent advocates of *perestroika*. All three have in the past criticized and resisted blatant political interference in the social sciences.

Signs of a new honesty. In espousing "socialist pluralism," Gorbachev and other high officials acknowledge that differences in opinion should be viewed as a normal feature of society and as a legitimate subject of study. This impulse is reflected in recent polls. They are more likely than past studies to present results that do not necessarily look "rosy" — as, for example, in a December 1988 poll that showed an increase in pessimism,[8] and a poll of newspaper readers in Leningrad that revealed widespread dissatisfaction with *perestroika*.[9] Polling is playing a growing role in the Soviet political process. While the party still uses polls to promote its policies and to demonstrate popular support, it also increasingly relies on them for realistic feedback about popular sentiment. The publication of poll results provides citizens with new information and encourages them to speak their minds. Citizens now cite poll results to demonstrate support for their demands.

Looking ahead. Polling in the Soviet Union still faces an uncertain future. The changes discussed above — the party's renewed support for social research, the ascendancy of Zaslavskaia, Grushin, and Yadov, and the establishment of a national public opinion research center — should help to place sociological work on a sounder professional footing. Still, it will take time to overcome the legacy of mistrust about polling. A recent *Moscow News* article begins: "Is this the police? Send an investigator right away! A suspicious character with a questionnaire is going around and asking questions here. He claims to be an interviewer conducting some kind of survey." The article says there were many such phone calls in Perm when the national public opinion center conducted its first poll there.[10] Zaslavskaia, for one, considers public passivity and mistrust to be much more serious and intractable than the methodological and organizational problems of survey research.[11]

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It is also clear that public opinion research still isn't free of political interference and other institutional constraints, when the research is conducted at government institutes. Largely because of these constraints, several public opinion researchers have established their own independent research "cooperatives" to free themselves of outside control. These are listed in Corning's (1989) comprehensive review of the contemporary public opinion scene in the USSR.

ENDNOTES

[1]*Pravda*, February 6, 1987.
[2]*Moskow News*, no. 35, August 28, 1988.
[3]*The Washington Post*, December 22, 1987.
[4]*Trud*, December 29, 1988.
[5]*Moscow News*, no. 27, July 3, 1988.
[6]J. Robinson, V. Andreyenkov and V. Patruchev, *The Rhythm of Everyday Life: How Soviet and American Citizens Spend Time* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).
[7]A. Corning, "Recent Developments in Soviet Public Opinion Research," *Report AR 6-89, Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research* (Washington, DC: Radio Free Europe).
[8]*Izvestiia*, January 1, 1989.
[9]*Leningradskaia pravda*, December 22, 1988.
[10]*Moskow News*, no. 35, August 28, 1988.
[11]*Trud*, December 29, 1988. See also

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WAS THE OCTOBER RESPONSE PUBLIC OPINION?

October 5-6, 1989

"Do you favor or oppose the following options for US policy toward Panama at this time...Use US military forces to invade Panama and overthrow Noriega?"

Favor	28%
Oppose	72

NOTE: Survey by the Gallup Organization, October 5-6, 1989.

December 20, 1989

"Do you approve or disapprove of the United States having sent its military forces into Panama to overthrow [Manuel] Noriega?"

Approve	82%
Disapprove	18

NOTE: Survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, December 20, 1989.