

# THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

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### RUSSIAN MEMOIR

By James A. Davis

From December 9 to December 20, 1989, I was with a team of American public opinion specialists (Norval Glenn, Albert Gollin, the Langs, Russell Neuman, Eleanor Singer and Howard Schuman<sup>1</sup>) who had the extraordinary experience of visiting Soviet opposite numbers in Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad. I despise amateurs' travelogues but this visit was so astounding, personally and professionally — two weeks later I am still having dreams "in Russian" and I know just two words of the language ("spassiba" and "nyet") — I feel obliged to get something down before it blurs even more.

#### Disclaimer

There are a number of reasons to doubt almost everything I am about to say. I mean this literally. I was in the USSR only ten days, I was soggy with jet fatigue, I know no Russian,<sup>2</sup> I visited only two places (two of the three largest cities), and my reading about Russia ended with *Anna Karenina* (so I was surprised that the trains are all electrified). Furthermore, there is the famous translation problem. Two examples:

Mel Kohn and I were in a restaurant in Kiev with two Russian hosts who had an animated exchange with the waiter. Mel and I each turned to our seat mate and asked "What did he say?"

Russian #1: "He said, 'There is no vodka to drink'."

Russian #2: "He said, 'There is only vodka to drink'."

Kohn and I were lavishly entertained at the home of Russian #1. Mel graciously remarked on their "extraordinary hospitality." Consternation ensued until we collectively figured out that our hosts had confused "hospitality" and "hostility."

These problems were in no way due to our hosts. Their English was amazing — they even made puns — and they know more about American popular culture than I do. But, as in the examples above, a translation is only as good as its weakest word. When someone says "We are making study of X," you don't know for sure whether they mean:

- 1: We have completed a study of X.
- 2: We are in the middle of a study of X.
- 3: We definitely plan to do a study of X.
- 4: We might do a study of X.

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Because our hosts were so obliging, such ambiguities could always be run down by playing "twenty questions" — but stamina and courtesy rule out cross-examination 12 to 14 hours a day.

## Russia

Peter Rossi once remarked that "All social stereotypes are true: Italians do wave their hands when they talk, Jews really are rich." Well, Russia and Russians are just like you think they are: They all wear boots and fur hats...They really are named "Natasha", "Vladimir", "Oleg", and "Sonia"...They serve beet borscht, Chicken Kiev and Beef Stroganoff...The construction is tacky, except in party facilities and monuments...Moscow U. does look like the world's largest hood ornament...They do line up patiently in front of shops...GUM, the fancy department store, has a stock which reminds an American of a 1930s small town dime store (actually, lots of Russia reminds one of the 30s)...Ladies do sweep the snow with brooms of twigs...Need I go on?

But there were surprises: In contrast to the buildings and shops, the people on the streets were well and warmly dressed, and many of the younger women looked quite fetching with their round faces, round fur hats, and artful makeup...Police presence seemed minimal; the only weapons I saw were pistols on a couple of traffic cops in Kiev...They don't drink like fish, at least since Gorbachev's temperance campaign. Even when vodka was available (in Kiev; no vodka in Moscow except, ironically, at the American ambassador's reception), it is sipped, not thrown down...I didn't see any outdoor signs exhorting people to do this and that...We ate very well (though some of the conference delegates from the boonies tactfully told us we were scarfing up things they hadn't seen for years)....

## The Political Scene

A *New York Times* reader is as well informed about what is going on in Russia as we were, but I shall cough up some weighty thoughts since (a) we were there during one of the most important turning points in 20th century history, and (b) Russian sociology is more intimately tied to politics than Western sociology. While European and American sociologists are quite "politicized" these days, they have no more involvement in real world political affairs than did Grandma Moses. Not so in Russia. Thus, a January 4 column by William Safire deals seriously with Tatyana Zaslavskaya, the Russian Howard Schuman/Norman Bradburn, undoubtedly

the first sociologist a *Times* columnist has not ridiculed.

Ideas, proposals, newsbreaks, and leaders swirl around at a rate that must be as dizzying to Russians as it is to American visitors. It was half an hour into a fascinating political discussion when I realized with a start that in contemporary Russian politics "left wing" means "anti-communist". Think about that for a moment.

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Four propositions may give deceptive coherence to this pudding.

First, there is a lot of *glasnost* ("openness").<sup>3</sup> Remembering Vice President Quayle's warning that this is all a trick to get us to lower our, ahem, National Guard, I kept looking for covert authoritarianism, but I couldn't find any. I did see lots of unnecessarily complex procedures, but that's not quite the same thing. Apparently, when an authoritarian system tells the folks to hang loose, they really shake it out. A couple of instances:

In a November 1989 telephone poll of 1000 Muscovites, 26% said they don't trust Gorbachev.<sup>4</sup> The substantive point is that 69% do trust him but I doubt that a thoroughly cowed citizenry would come up with those 26 negative points.

While touring a restored monastery in Kiev, I experienced my usual negative reaction to castles and cathedrals — that a lot of poor folks went without motor scooters and color TVs to get them built. I asked my Russian host whether the guides took the line that the monks exploited the people or a line that glorified Russian culture. He said, "Hard to say. Since *glasnost*, some say the one, some say the other. It depends on how they feel."

Second, the driving force for change in Russia (not necessarily so in the peripheral republics) is the economic debacle, more exactly the maldistribution of consumer goods. As one of the young researchers said to me, "When they ration soap in peace time, something has to be done." Our hosts felt that the Russians could take a stagnant standard of living with little complaint but that the tangible decline in the last few years made reform inevitable.

Third, Westerners who crow about the triumph of capitalistic ideas over communism are talking through their hats. (Again, I exclude the non-Russian republics and East bloc nations, about which I know nothing). Several of our hosts stressed the pragmatic national mood. They said Russians feel that if some free market adjustments will improve material things, fine; if not, they'll stick with authoritarianism or try Zen or Ouiji boards or whatever. No one I met even hinted that anyone thought there is any moral merit in capitalism. (A 1987 telephone poll of 718 Moscovites gave 78% saying *perestroika* is "a development of socialism" and 5% saying it "means a break from socialism".<sup>5</sup>) How does one reconcile the obvious ideological tensions here? It's simple. One blames the Communist party apparatus, while clinging to the ideal of socialism. (That's what the left anti-communism above means.) Thus:

**Russian joke:** "You Americans are always telling us to have two political parties. Hell, we can't afford the one we do have!"

In her illuminating summary of the contemporary scene Zaslavskaya estimates the current political spectrum to be as follows:

1. **Radical democratic** (12% to 18%): transfer of power from the party, plurality of property forms (i.e. "mixed economy"), more social rights and freedoms, loosen grip on the peripheral republics.

2. **Moderate democratic** (23% to 33%): much like #1 except gradualists and no restoration of private property.

3. **Reformist-authoritarian** (13% to 19%): economic radicalism and political conservatism...maintain party power.

4. **Conservative** (37% to 47%): "strict order", preserve the Empire, no political or economic reform.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, the mood I sensed was guardedly optimistic and reformist, not apocalyptic.<sup>7</sup> This seemed true of the people with whom we talked and of the poll data we saw. The mood is certainly reformist:

A June, 1989, NCPOS (The All-Union Center for Public Opinion Studies, sometimes called the National Center) national survey on who should hold "the country's supreme power" showed the following preferences:<sup>8</sup>

61%: USSR Congress of People's Deputies  
30%: USSR Supreme Soviet  
10%: The Party apparatus

"...the feeling I got was also very much like Philadelphia in 1787 — if Benjamin Franklin appeared on TV every night and George Gallup had been around to ask whether the citizenry thought George Washington was doing an Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor job."

As for optimism, a November 1989 telephone poll of 1,000 Muscovites asking "Do you believe in the success of *perestroika*?" got:

26%: Very confident  
45%: Partly confident  
16%: Not confident  
11%: Hard to say

Mansurov and Semenova (p. 12) summarize several such polls by saying that the Russians are relatively pessimistic about (1) the economy and (2) international problems *within* the USSR, but relatively optimistic about (3) political reform, democratization, *glasnost* and (4) foreign policy [i.e., dealings with the West].

I was struck by the idealism (naivete?) of the people we met. They may criticize and disagree with the leaders, but, unlike the American visitors, they do not assume their leaders are demagogues or psychopaths. You should bear in mind that (a) the Congress was meeting while we were in Moscow, (b) many of our hosts were deeply involved in the Congress (Zaslavskaya is a delegate), and (c) Muscovites, like Parisians, tend to assume that the importance of events drops sharply a kilometer outside the city limits. Nevertheless, the feeling I got was only partly 1932. It was also very much like Philadelphia in 1787 — if Benjamin Franklin appeared on TV every night and George Gallup had been around to ask whether the citizenry thought George Washington was doing an Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor job.

### The Sociological Scene

Contemporary Russian sociology is brand new, decentralized, nonideological but applied, "Western" in style, overcommitted and understaffed, and desperate for computers.

Apparently Gorbachev decided several years

ago that the USSR should have Western style sociology. And boy are they getting it! They have set up sixteen departments of sociology from scratch, two major research centers (Tatyana Zaslavskaya's NCPOS and Vladimir Yadov's ISAN—The Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences<sup>9</sup>), public opinion research centers in the capitals of the 15 republics, teams of sociological advisors for the administrators in each province, and a zillion groups, projects, and minor centers.

The sociology we saw is totally nonideological in that it is devoid of Marxist doubletalk. However, it is highly applied, on the side of *perestroika*. The "feel" of the survey people is more like American market researchers, evaluation researchers, and political pollsters, than professors of public opinion.

Without being patronizing, I must add that I was positively impressed by the "Westernization" of the approaches we saw. We got detailed information on the All-Union Center (Zaslavskaya's NCPOS). They are developing, from scratch, a field capacity amazingly similar to NORC/ISR. The sampling is highly professional with Kish tables, multi-stage samples, validations, etc. and it is sophisticated (they use internal passport records for sampling, but knowing they are inaccurate—20% of the names are wrong—they use them as a sample of residences and proceed to do their own listing).<sup>10</sup>

Like everyone else, they are worried about interviewer quality and training, especially since they are starting from zero. They were also worried about untrained respondents, as it were. It stands to figure, from deep sociological principles, that a nation under the thrall of centuries of despotism might not "have any" public opinion. Like much of heavy duty sociology, this insight turns out to be bunk. USSR "don't know" percentages are much like ours and, as shown above, the respondents seem quite willing to kvetch about the system. How can this be? Well, they seem to be quick learners.<sup>11</sup> NCPOS polls got 23 to 30 percent D.K. in a February 1989 poll "about the system" compared to 5 to 10 percent in September, 1989<sup>12</sup>. Mansurov and Semenova (p. 22) put it neatly:

The surveys show that the Soviet people support *perestroika*, trust the leader of *perestroika*, M. Gorbachev, and believe in his initiatives. The process of politization of the Soviet people is going on rather quickly.

Except for the language problem, our discussions with the NCPOS and ISAN people could have taken place in a staff seminar at NORC, ISR, SCPR, or ZUMA. But I should draw a little circle around this because it applied to the specialty of survey research, not necessarily to all sociology. The experience of the ISSP (a consortium of GSS-like surveys from Australia, Austria, Britain, Germany, Holland, Israel, Hungary, Italy, and Norway) has been exactly the same: there seems to be an international culture of survey centers that cuts across language and politics. But this may not be true for sociology in general. I noted when I was in Kiev with Mel Kohn that the fog increased perceptibly when we strayed from computers, samples, field work, and marginal results to abstractions such as "values", "social structure," and "personality." (I notice the same thing when I attend American Sociological Association conventions, or, for that matter, Harvard department meetings.)

We now begin to shift to problematic areas. Inevitably, Russian sociologists are overextended and overworked. (NCPOS was established in March, 1988 and in 1989 it did 60 surveys!) The result, inevitably, is that polling (getting out the basic answers quickly) dominates analysis (serious articles and monographs). Given the intimate

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connection between the USSR survey people and *perestroika*, these pressures will increase. Add to this a shortage of researchers (I'm fairly sure there is not a single Western Ph.D. sociologist in the USSR, although we were all impressed by the high intellectual quality of the young "retreads" who are being thrown into the trenches of research) and there is reason for concern about building empirical, nonapplied sociology.<sup>13</sup> The final problem area is computers. For example, NCPOS does not have access to a mainframe that will handle the cumulative GSS file; in Kiev, the sociological center has only an AT clone (and no Xerox machine).

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So, I close with another historical analogy. NORC was formed in 1941, was diverted to polling in Washington during World War II, and ground out research for two decades before it had a computer. I sensed a lot of the spirit of optimism and pioneering in Russia that I had experienced at NORC in the late fifties and early sixties. If this spirit could be supplemented by a few PC's and Western textbooks, the assets — talent, high level political support, and incredibly interesting problems to study — should allow Russian sociology to learn public opinion research even faster than the Russian people are learning to *have* public opinions.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>We agreed that if our Pan Am plane had bad luck, *POQ* would have the damndest memorial issue in its history.

<sup>2</sup>They not only speak a foreign language but they misspell it so the letters go with the wrong sounds. This means that unlike, say, France or Italy, you cannot guess what signs mean. I learned this in my attempt to solo on the famous Moscow metro. There

was no route map on the wall, just signs in what appeared to be Fortran. I retreated quickly and went home in a cab.

<sup>3</sup>One of the delicious ironies of the trip is that when picking Western universities for their students, the Russians try to avoid places where the students will be doused with Marxist mumbo jumbo.

<sup>4</sup>V. Mansurov and L. Semenova, "Public Opinion of the Social and Political Situation in the Soviet Union." Paper presented at the USSR/USA Colloquium on Public Opinion. Moscow. (litho)

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>6</sup>Tatyana I. Zaslavskaya, "Social and Economic Transformations in the USSR and Some Aspects of Public Opinion." Paper presented at the USSR/USA Colloquium on Public Opinion, pp. 4-8. (litho)

<sup>7</sup>A few days ago Duane Alwin told me that Howard Schuman's impression was the total opposite — yet Howard and I had virtually identical stimuli.

<sup>8</sup>Zaslavskaya, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Vladimir A. Yadov (1989). "Sociological 'Marathon' During the First Congress of the People's Deputies." Paper presented at the USSR/USA Colloquium on Public Opinion. Moscow. (litho)

<sup>10</sup>E. Petrenco (1989). "The Strategy of Public Opinion Study in the USSR: Principles of National Sample." Paper presented at the USSR/USA Colloquium on Public Opinion. Moscow. (litho)

<sup>11</sup>Possibly because they are media buffs. Their TV is chock full of political information (and with increasingly diverse viewpoints) and they are great readers. I didn't see any TV data, but an American December 1988 telephone poll showed 61% of Muscovites reading a book daily, compared with 30% in Boston, 28% in Detroit, 34% in New York, and 38% in San Francisco. Marttila & Kiley, Inc. (1989). "Project Understanding: Identically Worded Public Opinion Surveys of Boston, Detroit, New York, San Francisco and Moscow, December, 1988." Boston. (litho)

<sup>12</sup>Zaslavskaya, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup>During my visit I had serious discussions with Russians about starting a Soviet GSS. Such a program might be very useful for helping them step back from polling issues.

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