

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Russia's Poverty

By Gregory Feifer

MARCH, 2001

MOSCOW—"People are kind," Antonina Burtsova said smiling, without a trace of irony. Several days earlier, she'd been kicked out of the train station where she panhandled several days earlier and had to spend a night outside in sub-zero temperatures, some of the coldest this past winter. The 75-year-old looked small and wrinkled in her small, neat-looking wool overcoat with its button-on, rabbit-fur collar.

"People give me money," she added, glancing down at the one-ruble coin (less than four cents) in her outstretched hand. "During the holidays, they also give bread and even candy. People are generally in better spirits then."

Burtsova now stands in a concrete underpass at Moscow's central Pushkin Square. It's part of a metro entrance leading into a network of pedestrian tunnels crisscrossing under busy Tverskaya Street. Her spot is near the site of a bomb explosion last summer that killed five people. A number of kiosks in the bombed-out stretch are still being rebuilt. Many others are open, however, and the mass of pedestrians pushing its way in one direction or the other must force

its way around those stopped in their tracks, their eyes caught by a cheap handbag or a bottle of beer or some other item in one of the stalls. The chilly air is fouled by smoke from hundreds of low-grade-tobacco cigarettes. Swarms of uniformed and plainclothes police and security guards patrol the area. From any vantage point, it's possible to spot at least one officer checking documents, invariably belonging to dark-skinned pedestrians. No one seems to notice Burtsova, pressed meekly against a



*An anonymous beggar in a Moscow underpass. Antonina Burtsova didn't want to be photographed herself, fearing some sort of a reprisal from the authorities for having spoken to me.*

wall, one of perhaps 20 or 30 panhandlers in the network of underpasses. Each pays the local police 30 to 45 rubles a day to be allowed to beg.

Burtsova looks timid and frail, but seemed in good spirits and smiled a lot. She still sleeps in train stations, where she pays waiting-room superintendents ten rubles a night. But Burtsova is not homeless. She rents an apartment in the southern city of Stavropol and traveled to Moscow several weeks earlier to raise money for rent and food. Her government pension comes to 260 rubles (\$9.29) a month, not nearly enough to cover her expenses. She will soon head back to Stavropol, taking a tortuously long route on various suburban commuter trains outfitted with hard wooden benches, on which pensioners can ride free.

During better years, Burtsova worked as a stenographer and then in a fruit-

canning factory. "Everything was once cheap," she said. "You could buy anything that was available." She and her husband, an army officer, were able to save a fair amount of their earnings over a period of 45 years. "And then in 1993, Sberbank [the state savings bank] gave us five hundred rubles and said that was all we were going to get." I asked how much was in their account. "Fifty thousand rubles."

Then Burtsova allowed a little irony. "What was the slogan back then?" she asked. "Oh yes, 'Keep your money in Sberbank—It's easy and profitable!'"

Burtsova's story is hardly unique. Most of the beggars on Moscow's streets are elderly. Of the several to whom I spoke that day, all complained of similar problems. When the economy collapsed with the demise of the Soviet Union, savings were wiped out by schemes staged by Sberbank and the Central Bank, which unexpectedly declared one fine summer day in 1993 that all old (pre-1993) banknotes would be void within three days. Those who persevered, and managed to endure long lines to cash in their old bills, saw their savings implode through inflation anyway. In the summer of 1991, the dollar was officially worth 27 rubles. Six years on, a dollar fetched over 6,000 rubles. Still more pensioners were taken in by myriad well-publicized pyramid schemes. Burtsova fell prey to one of these, too. "I began putting my pension money into a bank that promised big profits," she said. "I was fooled and lost everything—again. I went to the police, but they did nothing."

Burtsova has since also lost her husband and a son; the latter died of an opium overdose at age 39.

To what does she ascribe her situation? She doesn't seem to want to answer at first—perhaps she's unwilling to simplify or appoint blame. "The U.S.S.R.'s elite decided to get rich," she said finally. But she doesn't employ the usual high-intensity tone of accusation one often hears on Moscow's streets—a relic of the Soviet penchant for denunciation. Burtsova speaks calmly in a resigned manner. "Our money was taken, but just look at the massive houses being constructed outside Moscow. On what were they built?"

Does Burtsova think the situation for people like her will change for the better? "No, there's no hope," she answers. "In the countryside, no one wants to work. Nothing much is planted or harvested because people got used to not working. Under the Soviet Union, they were forced to work. Freed prisoners were given ten days to find work and enterprises had to hire them or else. Now there's freedom, so what do people do? They drink and smoke as much

as they can." Burtsova had fingered one of the failing Russian economy's most damaging symptoms. While the World Health Organization considers a country's health actually endangered if annual per-capita alcohol consumption exceeds eight liters, Russia's per-capita consumption in 1999 came to more than double that at 16.5 liters according to a recent parliamentary report. And that's only one of the mind-boggling statistics.

## Post-Soviet Trends

Burtsova doesn't speak much of the initiative-killing death grip on the economy held by a corrupt government bureaucracy and criminal and quasi-criminal groups. For so many who lived and toiled under the Soviet Union, their plight is directly attributable to the collapse of the state as they knew it. That's no coincidence. Under the Soviet system, the state employed around 96 percent of the labor force. Moreover, despite generous perks for Party officials—who



*Stairs leading to a central Moscow pedestrian underpass, where pensioners often go to sell trinkets or beg*

lived socially "separate" lives of relative privilege—a number of factors, including communist ideology, contributed to an overall income distribution that was more egalitarian than in most market economies. According to a World Bank report, collective consumption (state-sponsored sanatoria, kindergartens, free vacations) and income-in-kind (houses for the nomenklatura) had the advantage of appearing more "collective." At the same time, they couldn't be accumulated and were easily withdrawn when recipients failed to toe the political line.<sup>1</sup>

That system ended with the Soviet collapse, and not only because 1991 saw a revolutionary change in ideology from communism and state planning to democracy and capitalism. Already in 1990, the Soviet Gross Domes-

<sup>1</sup> Branko Milanovic, "Income, Inequality, and Poverty During the Transition from Planned to Market Economy," The World Bank (1998).

tic Product had shrunk for the first time by 2.5 percent. Russia's GDP declined a further 6.5 percent in 1991 and 16 percent in 1992. It continued a double-digit fall for the next two years. By 1996, the combined GDP of countries that comprised the former U.S.S.R. had dropped to approximately 60 percent of its 1987 level.

How did that affect a population used to having everything provided by the state? Social subsidies shrank, inflation skyrocketed, devaluation spiraled out of control. Wages weren't paid, savings were wiped out. The government didn't even index—let alone compensate—for lost savings, so that someone who retired in 1990 with enough money to live modestly for 20 years would have found by 1996 that his or her life savings barely covered spending for just a few days. Simply buying a beer in one of Moscow's many new western-style bars could have blown the entire amount.

The effect was devastating. According to the World Bank report, the number of people living below the bank's poverty line for transition countries — less than \$4 per day — was 14 million (out of a population of approximately 360 million) in 1989. By 1997, the figure jumped to over 140 million.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, such social benefits as free health care and education, once taken for granted, began to disappear. What free services remained were of such low quality as to be rendered almost negligible. Mortality and morbidity skyrocketed. Unemployment, once officially nonexistent,

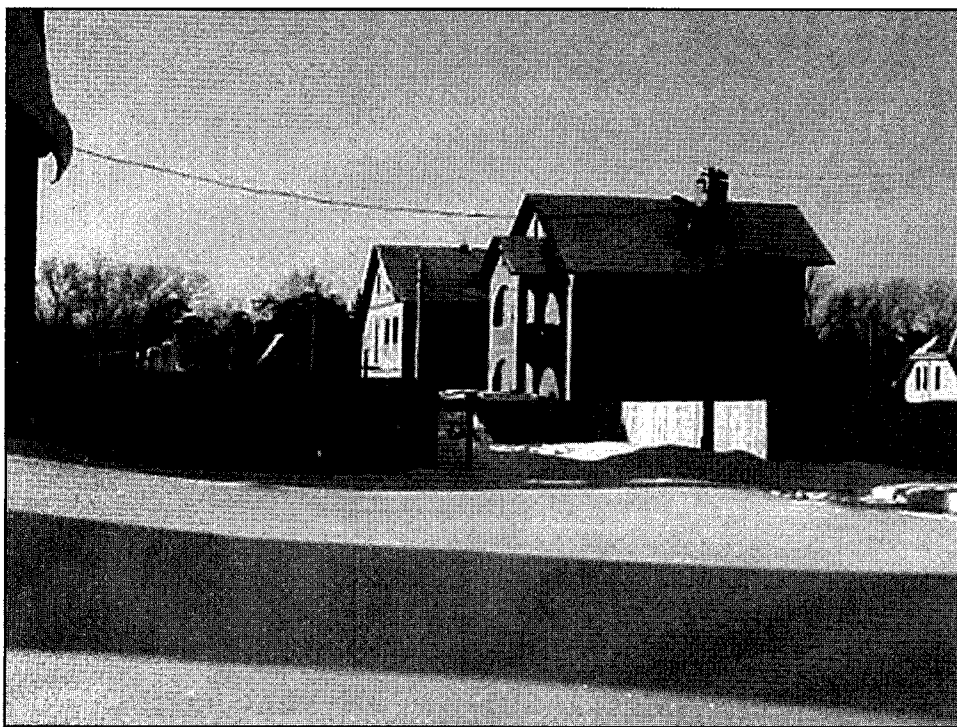
zoomed to more than 15 million by 1996.

Meanwhile, former Communist bosses and managers and members of the new "business" elite stripped the assets of state-owned companies and funneled away cash flows from exports of raw materials abroad. At the same time, a growing bureaucracy ensured that meaningful reform would be increasingly harder to enact. Private initiative was squashed by newly private, state, criminal and grey monopolies, while state officials enforced unspoken mafia-style codes of conduct, part of a similarly mafia-style economy. Bribes paid by society at large to get around a corrupt and purposefully inefficient system created a vicious circle of compliance.

Arriving at an idea of the social devastation's scope is nearly impossible. Accurate data about the extent of Russia's poverty is unattainable and scholars routinely debate methodology. One of the chief obstacles to analysis is that government figures often show what citizens are entitled to receive rather than what they actually get. In 1997, for example, only 20 percent of income to which Russians were entitled under federal laws was actually paid. Since then, wage and benefit arrears have declined dramatically, thanks to a series of populist governments, but inflation—aided in no small part by the government's printing of rubles—has wiped away a significant amount of the value of what has been paid. At the same time, many Russians conceal their true incomes to avoid paying taxes (for services they largely



<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



*A row of gaudy red brick dachas, or summer houses, along the infamous Rublyovskoye Highway outside Moscow. Such settlements—this is but a modest example—are already numerous in the city's surrounding areas. While many potholed Moscow streets languish in disrepair, Rublyovskoye Highway itself has recently been lavishly repaved and equipped with requisite accoutrements such as lampposts.*

don't get). A recent World Bank study found that most people admitted to spending twice what they claimed to earn. Other—research has suggested that undeclared “informal” income had rocketed in the past few years to an average of 42 percent of total household—earnings.

But if it's impossible to collect accurate statistics, it's easy to spot general trends, which are painfully evident. Together with a massive growth of poverty, the country has seen an even larger growth in inequality. Those who control cash flows drive around in Mercedes cars, shop in expensive boutiques and dine in chic restaurants. They also routinely flout the law—driving, for example, on the wrong side of the road and through red lights. The more brazen the law-breaking, the higher the status. Middle-range Russian capitalists simply pay off the police. Higher-ups don't even have to bribe because they lord it over a system that does it for them.

The other half, which effectively supports the lifestyles of the wealthy, generally lives in miserable conditions, wears shoddy clothes, eats poor-quality food and dies sooner. (The average life expectancy for Russian men, which has been plummeting since the Soviet collapse, now stands at 59 years—74 for women—one of the lowest among developed countries. Meanwhile, birth rates continue to fall and mortality rates grow.) Life for the average Russian is

nastier, more brutal, and shorter. It's also denigrated by the social system in which it exists because it's at the bottom of the pile. If the wealthy regularly break laws, the great unwashed had better obey them. Even if they do, they're often stopped by police and checked for documents, to name but one example of state control. Since it's never really clear what the law actually is, bribes are usually the easiest way out.

### Growing Numbers

According to one report, Russia's “traditional” poor, as in Soviet times, consist chiefly of families with more than two children, single-earner families (especially female-headed), families with disabled members and pensioners,—mostly women.<sup>3</sup> The “new poor” include the unemployed and increasing numbers of working poor. As far as—admittedly

unreliable—statistics show, two-thirds of poor households are supported by at least one individual with work. Of the roughly 50 percent of the population that fall below the western-imposed poverty line (of \$4 a day—as opposed to the official Russian level of \$1 a day), 66 percent are counted as working poor. In 1996, about one-third of the poor were children and one in ten were pensioners.<sup>4</sup> Little data is available for levels of homelessness. But it seems to be growing, in part because poverty-stricken apartment owners often sell their recently privatized property for food or alcohol.

Another World Bank study published last year, on “the feminization of poverty” in Russia, says Russian women's vulnerability is growing, particularly among single mothers and women pensioners. The study also indicates that since Russia's ruinous economic crisis in August 1998, poverty has spread by incorporating families with two working parents whose combined earnings aren't enough to feed their children. Slight increases in benefits such as those proposed by President Vladimir Putin won't make much difference to that pattern, the study concludes.

To cope with seemingly insurmountable problems, Russians have developed a number of so-called “survival strategies,” many of which already existed under the Soviet Union. Families spend whatever savings they have, borrow from extended families, and earn cash from infor-

<sup>3</sup> Simon Clarke, “Poverty in Russia,” *Problems of Economic Transition* (Sept. 1999).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



mal second jobs. Many also have access to plots of land or dachas with gardens, where they grow their own vegetables. That practice alone is said to have saved the country from total collapse. At the same time, many basic expenditures remain extremely low, with rents, utility bills, health and transport heavily subsidized (while the infrastructure to support those services crumbles for lack of money for investment).

### 1998 Crisis and Recovery

As I've already hinted, the country's 1998 financial crisis was another incomprehensible blow to the bulk of the population. The crash of a government pyramid-debt scheme resulted in a devaluation of the ruble and an ensuing collapse of the banking sector. Savings were once again wiped out—this time among large numbers of a nascent middle class, members of which lost tens of thousands of their own dollars.

But the crisis had an upside. Devaluation made imported food and goods more expensive, and for once domestic producers had a chance to compete with foreign products. In addition, a sudden fortuitous rise in what were very low oil prices led to a recovery in the economy. The GDP rose 7.7 percent last year, leading to a chorus of praise from many western journalists and a majority of economic analysts. The dissenters insisted that the growth had to be seen in context. (For example, the former superpower's GDP, at \$230 billion last year, is approximately comparable to that of the U.S. state of Georgia.) Now, increasing numbers of observers say the picture will deteriorate quickly

because the government did nothing to invest in its infrastructure when times were good. Among the doomsayers is liberal economist Andrei Illarionov, President Putin's top economic adviser.

Illarionov routinely condemns government policies, and predicts a new economic crisis. "Close scrutiny of the ongoing economic processes and an analysis of their trends clearly show that the situation is unfortunately worsening and not improving," Illarionov said in an interview with Trud newspaper last February. "Our country received additional proceeds of around 35 billion dollars only thanks to high world oil prices," he added. "Huge money fell on us out of thin air, so to speak, but we were unable to use that unique situation. The authorities did not cope with economic management last year." Already, in February 2001, growth in industrial output slowed to 0.8 percent from a year earlier.

Official poverty figures also seemed to show an improvement last year. According to the Russian Center of Living Standards, part of the Labor Ministry, poor Russians saw an upswing in their standard of living. The government's subsistence level increased by 18.4 percent (178.4 rubles, or around \$6), while average per-capita cash income rose a whopping 32.5 percent (533.1 rubles, or around \$19). Put in simpler terms, the cost of the government's subsistence level edged up 1 ruble while the population's income rose by 3 rubles. The average per-capita income's purchasing power rose 11.7 percent. At the same time, the study said, income growth involved a wide portion of the population rather than only the usual high-income groups.



*Russia suffered terribly this year during a record-breaking cold spell in Siberia and the Far East that lasted for many weeks and saw temperatures dropping to minus 57 degrees Celsius. Meanwhile, clouds dumped more snow on the Moscow Region in February than during any one-month period since 1901.*

Despite the statistical changes for the better, however, a number of doomsayers say the overall living standard remains desperately low and will fall even lower. *Ekonomika i Zhizn* newspaper reported that average individual incomes' real purchasing power last year came to less than half of the pre-reform year of 1991. At the same time, some regions reported deterioration in the year of 2000. Another indicator also looms large for government critics: on the whole, in the fourth quarter of last year, consumer spending stood at a high 73 percent of total personal income. That means most people couldn't save money, which is essential for improving living conditions. Any significant development in the standard of living, *Ekonomika i Zhizn* reported, is therefore highly unlikely.

The government now says 36.7 percent of the population, or about

52 million people, lives below subsistence level, the equivalent of less than one dollar a day. The official minimum wage this year was raised by only 50 rubles (\$1.79) to 132 rubles (\$4.74) a month, and isn't scheduled to rise above the ruble equivalent of \$10 until July 2001. But even when the minimum wage does cross the \$10-a-month threshold, it will still stand at some 75 percent lower than the official subsistence level. At the same time, the rich are getting richer. Salaries for the 10 percent of households with the highest income came to 32 times those for the lowest 10 percent last year, and their total income was 44 times higher.

Meanwhile, about half of all families with one child live below the subsistence level. With three children in the



*The snow-covered 280-kilometer road to Staritsa lay through a bleak white landscape.*

family, chances are three out of four that each family member will have less than a dollar a day on which to live. Meanwhile, only 14 of the country's 89 regions actually pay benefits to families that are entitled to them, while the rest run entitlement debts of 26 billion rubles (\$935 million).

Tatyana Maleva, a social-affairs expert at the Carnegie Endowment's Moscow office, is one of those who told me there's little hope the situation will improve in the foreseeable future and that there's much to show that it will likely deteriorate. The chief problem with last year's Labor-Ministry statistics, she said, is that the government's definition of "subsistence level" lies at least 30 percent lower than it should. That skews any clear understanding of the real poverty level. "Official methodology is mistaken and contradictory," she said. While wages for society's wealthiest 20 percent grew along with those of the poorest, those poor who did not fall below the government's subsistence level increased in number and as a whole became poorer.

Maleva put at about 50 percent of the population those who are not officially poor, but who have yet to reach the so-called "independent" middle class (part of the top 20 percent). That number will likely grow because the state is pursuing the wrong policies. "The state still retains a pa-

ternalistic attitude to the poor," Maleva said. "The government tries to index and raise pensions, wages and money for budget-supported sectors in general. But that's the easiest way of addressing the problem. The result of such direct regulation is growth at both poles but a decline in the middle." The only way to change the trend, Maleva said, is to undertake fundamental economic and social reform such as encouraging the growth of small businesses and competition and allowing greater mobility so that workers can move to regions with employment.

Unfortunately, the government's policies are aimed almost in the opposite direction. A continuation of Soviet-era practices, such as restricting migration (in direct violation of the constitution), together with a massive collusion with corrupt big business, works toward stifling the type of economic change that might lead to improvement in social conditions. Not only are small businesses not encouraged, they are squashed. Competition is anathema to the bureaucrats and "businessmen" who run the economy and insist on maintaining the status quo.

Over the past year, journalists and analysts often trumpeted the government's economic reforms, such as the institution of a flat 13-percent income tax. In fact, real economic reform never got off the ground despite continuing pro-reform rhetoric from the government and Kremlin. The very insistence that Putin is interested in reinforcing conditions for Russia's so-called market economy serves to cover up the fact that the truth is far different.

The beginning of this year was especially miserable for many Russians, particularly in Siberia, where temperatures reached record lows and stayed there for many weeks. Hospitals became overwhelmed with severe frostbite cases as heating pipes froze and radiators exploded. Thousands of families huddled in single rooms kept above freezing by homemade electric heaters or coal-burning stoves. Russian television showed countless apartment walls coated in ice. The elderly and the young were among the first to begin dying from the cold. Heating systems collapsed because the country's power grid is so old that it literally fell apart with the surge in demand. It reached that state because corrupt local officials have channeled budget money away from investing in cruddy Soviet-era infrastructure while also failing to stock up on enough coal and other fuel. Meanwhile, capital flight out of Russia, at a conservatively estimated annual pace of around \$25 billion, continued unchecked.

## Food Distribution Drive

In early March, I accompanied a group of volunteers who planned to drive to several small villages about 200 miles north of Moscow in the Tver region to distribute food aid. When I first heard of the event, I thought the group was organized by some non-profit humanitarian aid organization called IWC. In fact, the letters stand for the International Women's Club, whose members are largely embassy spouses and wives of foreign businessmen. Among the



*A dejected-looking crowd greeted us upon our arrival in Staritsa.*

club's activities is holding handicraft sales and using the money to buy food to distribute to poor families. I went along to help.

We met one snowy Saturday morning outside the gates of the German Embassy. It had been snowing every day for many weeks and the driving conditions looked grim. That didn't stop the volunteers from flashing broad, conscience-easing smiles. We piled into our cars and drove onto the northwestern Moscow-Riga highway to make the slippery, three-and-a-half hour trip.

We arrived in the village of Staritsa to find about 40 villagers queued in front of a table standing by several stately-but-crumbling pre-Revolutionary buildings at a small crossroads. The locals glued their eyes to two trucks from which volunteers were already unloading boxes of cheap tea, tins of Soviet-era canned pork and beef and large packets of macaroni into smaller trucks for distribution in other villages. A group of IWC members directed volunteers. One foreigner, a woman with a loud-carrying, Australian-accented voice and dressed in a sweeping purple shearling overcoat and delicate-looking leather shoes, carefully made her way over mud and slushy snow while barking orders. No one seemed to be listening. Too many foreigners had come to help and a number of them could find nothing to do but stand around and

watch, almost as glumly as the villagers.

Meanwhile, wary and dejected-looking locals continued to watch every move. "They've come to see our shame," one woman moaned.

I'd wanted to take in how the villagers reacted to the foreigners and the low-grade food they'd brought with them. But it felt shameful to be staring at the wretched locals, as if they were laboratory rats about which I'd later write a report. Moreover, the pitiful amount of food they'd be getting didn't warrant much gratitude on their part. I redoubled my efforts at helping to unload one of the trucks, trying to steal glimpses of the recipients.

A number of Russians had come to help from the small city of Tver, the region's capital. One of the organizers, the wife of a German diplomat, mistaking one of these volunteers for an aid recipient, told her to stand back. Realizing her mistake, she apologized too profusely, as if being a villager queuing for free food was a shameful fate indeed. When the goods were finally distributed between trucks, the foreigners split up. I loaded my Land Rover with four volunteers and followed a slow-moving truck along a route of over one hundred kilometers to distribute food to three villages.

We drove through a barren white landscape. Most of



*The crowd watched as volunteers distributed food aid between several trucks. "They've come to see our shame," said one woman.*



*A number of horse-drawn sleighs were used to cart food away.*

the locals we saw along the way were walking along the side of the road. We passed very few cars, often driving stretches of over 20 kilometers without seeing even one. On reaching our first destination, the tiny village of Lukovnikovo, we parked on a slushy roadside and set up a badly managed assembly line putting together bags of food to distribute to villagers whose names were read from a list prepared by local administrators. Into each bag went tins of the pork and beef, a can of condensed milk, packages of tea, a carton of milk, a bottle of vegetable oil and a bar of chocolate. In addition, each recipient received a large package containing macaroni, flour and buckwheat groats.

Recipients were mostly middle-aged and elderly women. They came up when their names were called and accepted the packages with smiles and words of deep-felt thanks. The volunteers were too busy to acknowledge much of the gratitude. The local men looked on. Teenage boys laughed at the foreigners. Several drunken men jeered. One angrily told me not to take any photographs when I brought out my camera. The volunteers understood, however, that the real underlying reactions—which I assumed to be shame for having to look at their fellow villagers accepting charity together with a feeling of helplessness—were a result of the dire

conditions in which these people live.

At the second distribution point, we again parked on a roadside, this time near an old church in bad repair. Its humble beauty stood in sharp contrast to the ugliness around us. Apart from our Jeeps and the Nike swooshes on the hats of some of the younger villagers, the scene could have come straight out of Gogol or Gorky. At one point, several cars appearing out of nowhere threatened us, dangerously whizzing by the group of volunteers and recipients.

Our truck was also parked directly in front of a small food shop. A number of recipients went directly into the store to sell the food packages. Several refused to walk around the working volunteers, interrupting the frantic assembly line by cutting through. Some elderly recipients who couldn't carry the food themselves called for shop clerks to come out and help them carry the food inside for sale.

"There's nothing you can do about that," said one of the organizers. "At least some of these people will eat better tonight." The woman had declined to be named for fear of bad press. "We once brought out a group of journalists and they wrote about how bad the living conditions were



*Food was distributed along the sides of roads. Some of the aid went straight into a nearby shop to be sold.*



and the local administration complained to us," she said.

"But the conditions *are* bad," I replied. "What else am I going to write about?" The conversation ended abruptly and I was viewed with increasing suspicion from then on.

Having received their packages, most locals placed them on children's sleds and pulled them away along the side of the road. Several horse-pulled sleighs were also put to work. Some volunteers kept an eye on the food because villagers had tried stealing. As empty cardboard boxes collected, villagers also began to fight over them. An attempt to form a line failed after several people grabbed boxes and ran away. Meanwhile, one elderly man appeared too drunk to carry off his packages. A volunteer, a German diplomat, helped him put his food into a burlap sack. Once the packages were inside, the man apparently couldn't remember what had happened to them. "Goodbye!" said the German dismissively, handing a bag to the next in line.

"What the fuck have you done with my things!" cursed the elderly man. He didn't seem fully convinced even after the mystery had been explained. But he slung the sack over

his shoulder and shuffled off, grumbling, tripping and almost falling several times.

The response from most of the recipients, however, far outweighed the miserable packages of food they'd been given, and which couldn't have provided more than two or three days' meals at most for a small family. "Thank you for not forgetting us," one woman said toward the end of the day. I realized then that this was the most valuable thing for these destitute villagers—the vague idea that perhaps someone somewhere cared about them.

I'd always looked at charity suspiciously—not it itself, but when proposed as an alternative to ongoing programs aimed at helping the "less fortunate." I'd also suspected the motives of once-a-year charity volunteers (admittedly, such as myself) and those who sign cheques for donations on the same timetable. I thought their motives were not really to help others but to chiefly assuage their own guilt for being better off. In Russia, however, where so many live in such miserable conditions and the state is crippled even more by its own kleptocracy,



*Villagers on their way to collect food from one of the distribution points.*



*A volunteer handing out bags of food.*



*A chapel in almost total disrepair  
next to a food distribution point.*

a little humanitarian aid was perhaps more than the villagers could have hoped for. The sorry sacks of food we were distributing took on a little more significance.

Our last stop was at a tiny hospital to deposit a few leftover boxes. The two-story concrete-slab building stood

seemingly in the middle of nowhere along a muddy road. Built three years before, it looked like it had been around since the Brezhnev years. The building's decrepit state was especially evident when compared with an adjacent, stately old, whitewashed pre-Revolutionary building. That structure had once housed the hospital, but its windows were now boarded shut. From a corner window of the new building, several unshaven men gloomily watched us unload.

Inside, a dark hallway with wires running haphazardly along its walls led to a kitchen reeking of old onions, general filth and stagnant air. I deposited my box and ran out quickly for another, eager to be done so I could get outside and breathe. The next stop was a local administration building, where we wearily celebrated the completion of our work. The building was an ancient, two-story wooden structure; its toilet consisted of an indoor "outhouse." The administration's three women—those who had read off lists of recipients—quickly brewed some weak tea, cut some white bread, put slices of greasy salami on a table and exhorted us to "Eat, eat!" Tired and ravenous, we did. For a moment it was indeed possible to feel at least a little good about oneself—a sentiment I strongly suspected, but to which I submitted nonetheless.

Soon after, we climbed into our Jeeps for the treacherous trip back to Moscow, leaving Tver's villagers to continue eking out existence in the face of grim realities. Antonina Burtsova, the Stavropol woman who came to Moscow to beg for her rent money, seemed to sum it all up: "Everyone does what he can," she said. "Some people beg, other sell clothes or food or seeds. Just don't put your money in a bank!" □



*Villagers pulling away food aid on a sled.*

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

### **Shelly Renae Browning** (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

### **Wendy Call** (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

### **Martha Farmelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Eckel McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

### **Gregory Feifer** (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

### **Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing M.I.T. in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

### **Peter Keller** (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

### **Leena Khan** (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A lawyer who formerly dealt with immigration and international-business law in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

### **Whitney Mason** (January 1999-2001) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

### **Jean Benoît Nadeau** (December 1998-2000) • **FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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