

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NPC-11

Moscow, U.S.S.R.
1 October 1985

"Communists" and "Millionaires": What Do They Think of Us ?

Americans believe that all Russians are communists, while Russians think that all Americans are millionaires. Neither know much about the other.
--Vladimir Golyakhovsky, Russian Doctor

I

When I read this opening sentence to Golyakhovsky's autobiography, I was struck both by its accuracy and by its incompleteness. If there is one thing that the U.S. publishing industry has impressed upon Americans, it is surely that there is not one stereotype of the Russians, but two: Russians are dissidents as well as communists. However much their number, homogeneity, and influence may be misrepresented to the American reader, dissidents are very much a part of America's impression of life in Russia. Left out of that stereotype, of course, are the millions of Soviets who are 1.) not Party members--in fact, it is generally estimated that Party members constitute only about 7% of the total population-- 2.) not dissidents; and, coincidentally, 3.) do not generate book sales in the United States.

And what about the corresponding stereotype? Are we, in Soviet eyes, a nation of millionaires? This is one of several questions I asked Soviet friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Dima, a ten-year-old who has been intensively engaged in political discussions of the U.S. in his school, gave the most cogent analysis. Most of his conclusions were based on information read aloud by his classroom teacher during the mandatory "Lesson of Peace" ("Urok mira") from the newspaper Pioneer Truth (Pionerskaia Pravda), the official publication of the Soviet organization comparable to--if more politically inclined than--our Cub Scouts and Brownies. From discussions both in this class and outside of school, he informed me, the general impression was that Americans were either very rich or very poor. The poor wander from courtyard to courtyard begging bread; the rich terrorize weaker nations and commit anti-Soviet acts. Dima's hesitancy in reporting this sorry state of affairs seemed to be motivated not only by fear of hurting my feelings, but also by evident suspicion that things were more complex than that.

Communists and dissidents; millionaires and beggars. Now, I thought, we are getting somewhere. In these two pairings, I began to recognize the signs of a true stereotype: one that applies to virtually to no one I know in either country.

One Soviet America-specialist--an adult--who has been to the United States many times nevertheless sees in these paired stereotypes a kind of "idiot's truth."

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If one looks, he insisted, not at the cartoon figures--the Communist, the Millionaire--but at the underlying theme of each oppositional pair, one finds them oddly revealing. Whereas money (both its presence and its absence) is the overriding measure in your country, he argued, then politics (both its use and misuse) is surely the corresponding measure in the Soviet Union. Its influence in each case is seen as determining the course of someone's life. And the prevalence of the "money standard" in the American way of life is as bewildering and alien to most Soviets as the "political standard" in the Soviet Union is to most Americans. What we Soviets don't generally understand about your rich people, he went on, is that it is possible to be both a millionaire and a hard worker. The Russian image of the rich man is based on a Russian historical model of the feudal landlord, an understandable misconception in a culture that moved rapidly from feudalism to socialism with very little lived experience of capitalism. For us, he explained, the rich man is by definition idle; he does not make money, he has money.

Dima, had he been listening, would have agreed. "Most kids here know that the rich Americans have good stuff: calculators, display modules, robots. But rich men don't work for those things; they just push buttons. Some even have their own robots that do everything for them."

If they stopped to think, most educated Soviets would conjure up other fragmented images of Americans, not from personal experiences, but from literature. True, nineteenth-century Russian literature is devoid of any portrayal of an actual American; only Russians dubbed "the American" exist, such as Pushkin's mad acquaintance, Fedor Ivanovich Tolstoi--"Amerikanets" (1782-1846), so named because during an 1803-05 ocean voyage he committed an unspecified breach of discipline so severe that he was put off the ship when it docked at a Russian colony on the Aleutian Islands, and had to make his way back to Moscow on his own. Twentieth-century literature, however, is rich with images of America and Americans. The most familiar Americas to Soviet readers, considered cross-generationally, are, no doubt, Maiakovskii's "My Discovery of America" and Il'f and Petrov's One-Story America. Both travelogues are so widely known in the U.S.S.R. that virtually no contemporary Soviet journalist would attempt a description of life in the United States--a Russian equivalent, for example, of Hedrick Smith's The Russians--without paying some kind of homage to these two works.

Side by side with an interest in the "discovery" of America by these writers, as well as such classic travel writers as Ogorodnikov and Machtet, there exists a notion of America as a place where Russians might avoid discovery; America as a terra incognita to which they could run when no alternatives remained. This is how it was contemplated by Stiva Oblonskii in Lev Tolstoi's Anna Karenina, by both Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov in Dostoevskii's Crime and Punishment, by Mitia Karamazov in The Brothers Karamazov, as well as in works by Goncharov, Turgenev, Chernyshevskii, Chekhov, and Korolenko. Yet the image of the American as capitalist, spy, or entrepreneur is largely a product of the last seventy years, fostered primarily by the Soviet media and by cheap novels.

II

In any event, men, rich or poor, seem to define the limits of most Soviets' thinking about Americans. Women in our country would seem not to exist.

When asked about American women, Dima simply shrugged; Boris Ivanovich, a retired theatre director, paused when asked the question, looked confused, and then, as if he had not even heard it, continued to speak in generalities that relied on a male referent ("good working men, good fighting men..."); Svetlana, an English teacher, openly admitted, "I have no image of the American woman, no idea at all, positive or negative, what they are like." When pressed further, she acknowledged she had seen "blue-haired rich women in minks" around the tourist hotels. "I only know enough to realize that they are not typical," she said, "but what is typical--that I can't imagine." One Soviet friend offered this explanation: "The only people we see from your country are men--in newspapers, photographs, on the news, in political caricatures; how could we know what the women are like?" This is not entirely true, of course. American films--They Shoot Horses, Don't They?, Kramer vs. Kramer, Tootsie--provide Soviet viewers with images of American women, albeit tailored to suit Hollywood standards. Perhaps the American male is simply vastly more compatible with the enemy status of the United States, and therefore a more efficient and convenient representation of our country.

Samantha Smith was one of the few American females whom Soviets could even name. She was the object of enormous curiosity on the part of Soviets, in part because of her dual status as American female and American child. Her death in an airplane crash this past autumn made a kind of fatalistic sense to many Soviets. It not only represented, in a symbolic fashion, the futility of a search for good relations between our two countries; it also confirmed the notion in many Soviets' minds that, for those Americans unable to fend for themselves, violence is an inevitable and uncontrollable part of their lives. "Of course Samantha was murdered," explained a driver who was giving me a lift home one evening, "there is no other plausible explanation. Your journalists couldn't write about it openly, of course, but she wielded too much political influence over the American people. That's the kind of man Reagan is. With him, everything is violence. And all those other passengers had to die with her, so it would seem like an accident." A corollary to this kind of conviction would have it that those who wish to survive must adopt equally violent behavior. "In your country, even the women carry pistols," one cleaning woman told me. "You may have your freedom over there, but we have our freedom, too; I don't need a pistol."

The harshest explanation of all for this narrow, violent, and male-centered image of Americans came from a young woman writer. "You have to understand," she insisted, "you occupy the position once held by the Fascists. And so, such questions--what does a Fascist do in his spare time? what are Fascist women like? how does a Fascist spend time with his kids?--would not even occur to us. Fascists are Fascists; Americans--Americans. One faceless, homogeneous, frightening mass. Fear prevents us from differentiating further than that."

This analogy is an extreme one, and not really accurate for all that. Boys in the schoolyards and after school, for example, play war games, but the enemy is still the Fascists. The "good guys" are either stalwart Soviet soldiers or peace-loving--and therefore "pacifist"--soldiers in a game known as "Natsi-Patsi" (Nazis and Pacifists). Don't Soviet schoolboys ever play Russians versus Americans, I asked one nine-year-old. "Never," he said. "The Fascists have already attacked us, so we know what it's like. The Americans haven't attacked us yet..."

The analogy fails in other respects as well. No derogatory terms for Americans exist in Russian, a language otherwise rich in racial and national epithets. In conversations I have had with passing strangers—taxi drivers, collective farm workers at the market place, people with whom I have caught rides around the city—people talk with open admiration of, even a sense of affinity with, American people, who are seen as distinct from the U.S. government. Again and again I hear the same catalogue of common traits: we are both huge, virtually unmanageable nations. We each have a violent past and at best an anarchic present. We have enormous untapped reserves, both in terms of national resources and national spirit. The American "Wild West" and the Siberian "Wild East" are each a part of our national mythology. Both of us, in many Soviets' perceptions, are uncultured, non-European peoples, uncomfortable with fancy etiquette, dress codes, and other restrictive standards of behavior. Instead, we are both expansive, naive, unpredictable, "simple-souled" (prostodushnye). As I hear Soviets describe the two nations, the same picture is always conjured up: two burly men in ill-fitting suits, too short at the wrists and ankles, straddling in a virtual embrace around a small, greasy table, on which stands a half-empty bottle; they exchange pledges of eternal friendship, which, in a moment of mutual confusion, can turn into a fistfight. This insistence on Russian and American affinities is not a recent phenomenon. "Ours is the only important Government which refuses to grant Russia political recognition," wrote one American observer in 1930, "and yet it is our country that Russia emulates and admires."³

One man I encountered, the driver of a grocery bus, was particularly insistent about Russian-American similarities. I sat on one of the shelves among the canned peas as we careened around the Garden Ring Road. While we talked about the United States, he kept glancing back at his pregnant passenger to ensure she was hanging on, thereby bringing us both close to disaster each time. "I bet they do this in America, too, right? Hitch around in cars and trucks?" "Not much," I said, "because it's too dangerous." "What do you mean, you think it's not dangerous here? It's exactly the same; why, I could be fined up to a hundred rubles for doing this!"

III

The distinction between the American people and the U.S. government is consistently fostered by the Soviet media, as well as contemporary literature and film. A most recent example is the Soviet blockbuster film "Flight 222," which depicts the events surrounding the defection of Godunov, a Bolshoi ballet dancer, several years ago. Not surprisingly, the film focuses not on the defection itself, but on the U.S.'s detention of the plane carrying Godunov's wife back to the Soviet Union. Whereas State Department officials were depicted as smarmy types with vague Mafia associations—dark shirts, light ties—and American journalists were presented as a pack of voracious wolves, the average American air traveller was amiable, even sympathetic to the detained Soviet passengers. As the Americans are evacuated from the aircraft, one claps a Soviet citizen on the shoulder and, in an unmistakable American twang, intones, "Don't lose heart."

While wealth and, in particular, the right to private property is disapproved of by most, it also constitutes one of the greatest allures of American society. As one child explained to me: "In America, you can own anything, even your own

helicopter. Poland is in between America and the Soviet Union, a little capitalism, a little socialism. In the Soviet Union, you go around different places, asking and asking, and then it turns out you can't own the thing after all."

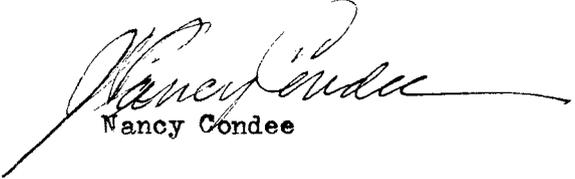
Most Soviets, often assuming me to be a Soviet Latvian or Estonian rather than an American, spoke with pride of their country as one of two superpowers, yet were acutely conscious of their lower standard of living compared with that in the U.S. "We have chosen to compete with the richest country in the world," lamented one taxi driver. "Of course conditions are hard; we are surrounded everywhere by enemy countries who wait like wolves for us to collapse." Most incompatible with Soviets' perceptions of America as a land of unlimited wealth is information about the poor and the unemployed as transmitted by the Soviet press. One potato seller quizzed me closely about whether they really existed. "How can a rich country have poor people?" she finally asked. "What kind of a rich country is that?"

Another topic of intense interest is race relations. While adults tend to ask questions--how bad is it? who is to blame?--Soviet children are a goldmine of information about U.S. racial tensions. Tolya, a nine-year-old, described them to me at great length, in terms that were alternately dream-like, geographically confused (South Africa was a viable stand-in for the United States), and oddly accurate:

America is divided up into two parts, one for Blacks, one for whites. The Blacks need a special pass to go to the whites' section. If they're caught in the white section at night and they don't have a white friend, they're in bad trouble. It's better to live in the white part, because in the Black part there are tanks everywhere, bombs going off, and they pour cold water on Black people's heads. The Black people can vote, but if they try to, they can be shot. They can buy things the same as white people, but if they want to buy an airplane, for example, it costs them more than a white person has to pay.

Hardest of all for Soviets to understand is what the United States "wants" from the Soviet Union. The genuine good feelings towards Americans as "great guys"--molodtsy, khoroshie rebiata--are usually followed by real confusion about the substance of U.S.-Soviet tensions. If we want peace and you want peace, the reasoning goes, what is the problem? As one writer put it, "We are not all that different from you. We want an extra room in our apartments, a bonus to our paychecks, a good spot in a vacation resort, respectable jobs for our children, health, good food, peace. Who could disagree with that?" Who indeed? Only my jaded American-specialist friend. Asked what the average Soviet wants, he gave a sardonic smile and replied, "World revolution...and a color TV." What kinds of solutions should be sought to reduce tensions between our two countries? Tolya, the expert on racism, gave the saddest answer. "I would tell Reagan," he said, "that that thing he's building in space is

going to cause war. I'd tell him, 'Build it slowly! Take your time! Don't rush!' If he could spend a million years building it, we would have a million years of peace. And only afterwards, as soon as it was already built, then we would have war."



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¹A.N. Nikoliukin, Literaturnye sviazi Rossii i SShA Literary Ties Between Russia and the U.S.A. (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 247-51. Literary representations of F.I. Tolstoi and references to his adventures can be found in the poetry of Viazemskii and in Griboedov's Woe from Wit. He also served as the prototype for Count Turbin in L.N. Tolstoi's didactic story "Two Hussars," and, some would argue, for Zaretskii in Pushkin's Eugene Onegin.

²P. Ogorodnikov, Ot N'iu Iorka do San-Frantsisko i obratno v Rossiiu [From New York to San Francisco and Back to Russia] (Saint Petersburg: F. Kolesov and F. Mikhin, 1872); G.A. Machtet, Putevie kartinki amerikanskoi zhizni [Travel Notes of Life in America] (Kiev: B.K. Fuks, 1902).

³H.V. Kaltenborn, We Look at the World (New York, 1930), 117, quoted by Hans Rogger in "Amerikanizm and the Economic Development of Russia," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 23, No. 3 (July, 1981), 382.

Received in Hanover 10/24/85