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SOVIET LIVING LEVELS - III

Forced Thrift in the Budget

The publication of family budgetary and nutritional studies has been singularly fragmentary in the Soviet press and those cases cited have been wholly atypical of the population. This continued reticence on national living levels is difficult to square with the recurrent claims of sustained rises in the output of foodstuffs and consumer goods. Nor do any of the numerous statistical handbooks add any relevant data to the living patterns of recent years. Nonetheless the Soviets have continued, and undoubtedly improved upon, their original studies on family budgets in the 'twenties; the last such survey appeared in 1928. Today these vital indicators of national well-being exist -- but for limited top-level circulation. This reluctance to disseminate the family budget indices, in contrast to the abundant industrial material, can only be construed as an admission of the continued low level of living among the mass of consumers.

Isolated accounts of individual families, despite obvious bias in methodology and selection, do afford valuable insights into a little known sector of the Soviet economy. In fact, such unitary accounts are about the most meaningful sources of information for western analysts to evaluate the dynamics of Soviet living levels.

In the new feature section, called "For the Home and Family", which periodically brightens up the back pages of Izvestia, there recently appeared a letter from a Dnepropetrovsk worker of unusual interest. A. Noskov, a skilled electrician of 18 years standing at the Dnepropetrovsk aluminum plant, with a family consisting of wife and 3 school children, earns 1300 rubles a month. The case is unusual in that he is the only wage-earner in the family. He pleads against irrational expenditures in consumer goods buying and dissolute living habits (excessive drinking) and documents his own case of "living economically -- not miserly but wisely, a quality which improves me goes by."

"For food we spend about 900 rubles a month, 30 rubl a day. Of course, if we had to buy everything in the shop each day this money would not be enough. However, my wife contributes her capabilities. In the summertime, when fruits and vegetables are very inexpensive here, she cooks, salts, preserves, and dries (foodstuffs for storage). Many of our fellow workers are fishermen and store away fish for the winter. This saves considerable cash...and permits substitution for the expensive meat products."

Izevetia, 2 August 1959

Here is a skilled worker living in a rich region of the Ukraine who spends 69 percent of his income for food! (Consumers

in many western countries average about 35 percent.<sup>1)</sup> And were it not for home food preservation, a practice only possible in a rich farm area where the fruit and vegetables are abundant and cheap, the outlays would exhaust his income! Home food processing then is his life saver. Purchased food costs amount to 190 rubles per family member a month (1958), which is in line with the 235 ruble level of the Andrionov family in Gorky in 1956, a case where all food was purchased (Background Information, 5 March 1957). The rigid economizing on meat expenditures reflects the high price and low supplies indigenous to the livestock industry since collectivization. In fact much of the emphasis in Noskov's letter was on cooking methods to stretch out the limited meat supply. Yet there were some improvements in living, but new and old consumer problems keep arising.

"We always have an adequate supply of butter, sugar, and milk. With other goods however it is more difficult, as more of them are needed. Several pairs of shoes a year, trousers quickly wear out. We try to plan ahead our purchases...Our life has become better. My family, for instance, occupies separate quarters. This year gas was installed and where we formerly paid 56 rubles a month for electricity we now pay only 10 rubles.

"So when a man is thrifty at home he will also notice any "waste" at the plant, but if he is a squanderer so will he be one on the job. I suggest it is necessary to teach people thrift -- and it is the State's business."

If a skilled worker on 1300 rubles a month is forced to adopt strict economy measures in rounding out a budget, 69 percent of which goes for food, what of the average worker on 785 rubles a month income?<sup>2</sup> The only alternative for a family to avert a crisis is for the housewife to seek employment in shop or factory and postpone household duties until after work. This accounts for the large number of women in the labor force. Just how the virtues of thriftiness in household management (as taught by the State) will impress working housewives to economize their resources more rationally, Izvestia leaves to its readers. It does fit in with the current national drive to cut down waste, reduce costs, and better utilize materials. That it is even proposed to apply it to the kitchen and home demonstrates that, even after good harvests with expanded farm output resulting from the agrarian reform of 1953, the basic problem of supplying adequate food and fiber still remains unresolved. To the undifferentiated mass of Soviet workers and employees -- the vast

<sup>1</sup> In USA 32% of family budget is spent for food; in Canada 30%; Sweden 36%, official UN sources. Background Information, 3 March 1957. In Czechoslovakia, it was 45.9% last year. Ceteka, 3 Aug. 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Background Information, 30 July 1959 cites an average wage of 785 rubles for non-agricultural workers in 1958, and projects the 1959 level to 810 rubles.



majority of the 20 million urban families living on gross incomes of 900-1400 rubles a month, the task of providing a modest family living still remains, after 40 years of Soviet rule, a difficult, if no longer a desperate, task.

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For earlier Family Budget studies see Background Information, 21 December 1956 and 5 March 1957.

CONSUMER GOODS IN RUSSIA AND AMERICA

Alfred Zaubergerman

C.R.U.

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The public debating match between host and guest was a rather unique feature of the visit of the Vice-President of the United States to the Soviet Union. One would look in vain for its pattern in a textbook of established protocol and etiquette for such occasions. But it was good-humoured and understandable to the common man; and (telev viewers in this country would, I think, agree with me) it was enjoyable to both performers and audience alike. Much of it turned on conditions of life for the people in both countries. The match, one should also note, has had a carefully-prepared and high-pitched accompaniment from all the Soviet propaganda media. With an intensity even greater than usual they are trying to convey to readers and listeners a tragic picture of the miseries of the American people. The Soviet leaders apparently decided to take the calculated risk of having an American exhibition in the heart of their country, plus that of exposing their people to some words of truth from the Vice-President of the United States. But at the same time they have been trying hard to immunise them against the germs of ideas on more comfortable living. With his amazing gift for a clever, witty and extempore performance Mr. Khrushchev himself has been doing all he could in the service of this cause. But his task has been truly formidable.

In his address at the opening of the Exhibition Mr. Khrushchev brought in comparisons made by his experts on the industrial potentials of the two nations and his pet tune on overtaking the American giant; in historical terms -- this would be almost around the corner. The statistics he gave are questionable in the extreme. But in any case, to ordinary men and women, a comparison of their own way of life with that of a family in another country has an incomparably high eloquence value. From this angle -- the things which the Americans have put on view in their Moscow pavilion -- a house, a car, a television set -- make a convincing yardstick. Of course, Mr. Khrushchev was right in saying that the Russians too produce many such goods. But there is a severe understatement in his remark that "apparently they do so in smaller quantity". The caption which his guest was able to provide for the exhibits -- was truly staggering. There are in America 50,000,000 families. They own as many cars, they possess as many television sets and, roughly speaking, there are in the USA three times as many wireless sets as there are families. Three out of every five American families own the house in which they live -- one could go on quoting these kind of figures ad infinitum.

On the other hand, no doubt over the last few years a good deal has been done to improve the lot of the people in the Soviet Union. The poor standards of clothing have somewhat improved,



and first and foremost one sees no longer the distressing symptoms of acute food shortage. As one visitor remarked, you can even see these days a piece of bread left on the table by a patron after a meal in a workers' restaurant; in the old days it would have disappeared in a moment. Khrushchev may indulge himself, as he does with more than justifiable optimism, in drawing up programmes for catching up with America in the supply of meat, milk as well as bread and butter. But to talk of a Soviet-American race in the more sophisticated fields of consumption is preposterous. Even at the present accelerated rate of construction it would take decades to give the Russian families homes comparable in quantity and quality with present American standards. The distance Russia would have to traverse to get on a par with America as regards car-owning can be measured by the fact that there are, per 1000 people, more than 320 cars in America, and in Russia only about two.

To put the differences in living standards in a nutshell one could say that (even at some Soviet yardsticks of purchasing power) it takes a Russian factory worker a whole month to earn what his American colleague earns in a week. To close the gap would be a matter of generations.

In a moment of engaging sincerity, Mr. Khrushchev remarked that while looking around the American exhibition, he had a certain feeling of envy. This kind of reaction -- all too human -- elicits, of course, more understanding than Soviet propaganda stories on the poverty of the American proletariat.