

BOOKS

USSR: THE CORRUPT SOCIETY

by Konstantin M. Simis

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For many years Western study of the USSR was confined largely to the official, formal, and observable aspects of the Soviet system. After World War II our knowledge and understanding of this system was broadened and deepened significantly by three new sources of information: (1) the Smolensk Archive, the documents of the Smolensk Regional Communist Party Committee that had fallen first into German and then into American hands in the course of the war (best known through the work of the late Merle Fainsod); (2) the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System based on interviews with several thousand postwar Soviet refugees (a project most closely identified with the studies of Alex Inkeles and the late Raymond A. Bauer); and (3) the postwar memoirs of other ex-Soviet citizens, such as Victor Kravchenko and Vladimir Petrov. Collectively, these new sources on the Soviet Union were a watershed and led to a series of penetrating studies on "how the Soviet system worked" under Stalin.

The next breakthrough in our understanding of the USSR came in the late '50s with the inception of the ongoing, scholarly exchanges between the USSR and Western countries. The experience of living in Soviet society gave Western specialists new insight into the post-Stalin Soviet system, at least in its more public aspects.

The rise of the Soviet human rights movement in the mid-'60s with its voluminous and continuing *samizdat*, or "underground," writings provides another source, perhaps the most revealing yet, on how the Soviet system *really* works in the post-Stalin era. The best of these works have been translated and published in the West, affording specialists and general readers alike extraordinary insight into the heretofore less well-known "informal" aspects of the Soviet system. Azbel's *Refusenik*, Plyushch's *History's Carnival*, Bukovsky's *To Build a Castle*, Svirsky's *Hostages*, and the late Andrei Amalrik's *Involuntary Journey to Siberia*—these are just a few of the "classics" of this genre. Each chronicled the emergence of facets of

what I shall call the "contrasystem" in the Soviet Union.

Contrasystems are a cross-national phenomenon in the European Communist states and have been on the rise for some time now. A well-developed contrasystem will usually include a flourishing, largely illegal "second economy" that competes with the planned economy of the state; a "parallel culture" that defies the canons of censorship and orthodox art; a vast subterranean religious belief system that conflicts with the regime's official policy of atheism; a subrosa "open university" that rejects the restricted curriculum of the heavily controlled higher education system; a widespread tendency to privatization that disregards the Party's incessant propaganda promoting civic participation; a dissident movement that specifically contributes a small but vocal counterelite, opposing a theoretically hegemonic Party elite; and a plethora of alternative political cultures and belief systems that challenge the monopolistic official political culture and the Party's tendency to depoliticize and reify large parts of the systematic decision-making process.

To our understanding of these phenomena Konstantin Simis's book makes a remarkable contribution. A Soviet lawyer until his forced emigration a few years ago, Simis offers the most comprehensive description to date of the *actual* workings of the Soviet system. Brezhnev's "Developed Socialism" is scarcely recognizable in Simis's carefully composed, eminently readable case histories of daily life in the USSR.

The initial image one carries away from *USSR: The Corrupt Society* is of a pre-modern, even feudal society: Local political elites tithe collective and state farms and all other producers and vendors of consumables within their fiefs. The sale of offices and pardons is not unheard of, reminiscent of the medieval Church, and the most significant economic relations are frequently at the level of barter. The population is stratified along nearly rigid caste lines based on one's proximity to power or access to ever scarce consumer goods. This is a world of perpetual shortage in which almost everyone's energies are focused on the quest for the essentials of everyday life.

On closer analysis one can delineate in this Pascalian universe not only familiar components of the contrasystem, and es-

pecially the "second economy," but previously unknown aspects, such as an informal legal system resembling a market economy with "justice for sale" by judges, prosecutors, and investigators.

This "economy" of the law with its cash justice also can be subsumed under the contrasystem's second economy, about which Simis's book is singularly informative. Reaching into the very apex of the Soviet system, he supplies detailed accounts of the downfall through greed of Politburo members Kozlov and Furseva. And Simis provides the fullest account yet of how the Georgian Party's governmental apparatus became a subsidiary of that republic's second economy: The Party first secretary's wife dealt in precious gems and "driver-owners" pocketed the fares in "privately" operated municipal buses. We learn that in Soviet industry the cash for the vital lubricant of the state's planned economy, bribery, is obtained from three sources: charging a firm for fictitious work; taking "kick-backs" from the workers for phantom work; and adding "dead souls" to the payroll, whose wages fill the coffers of the bribery "fund." Tales of Soviet underground millionaires, some old and some new, are also provided.

The police too have a place in the second economy, offering such "commodities" for sale as car-inspection certificates and residence permits, and providing such services as ticket-fixing and turning a blind eye to foreign currency speculation. Apropos the latter, the interested reader will find heretofore unknown details of the famous Rokotov case of 1961. And the author includes a fascinating discussion of the prostitute as denizen of the subterranean economy in both Russia and the West. Highest on the ladder of Soviet prostitutes is the "hard currency" call girl, who does business only with foreigners. Then there is the "hotel prostitute," a kind of under-the-table room-service offering, and, last, the "station prostitute," who works the rail terminals, bribing station personnel for use of empty cars as a place of rendezvous.

One might wrongly conclude that all of this flies in the face of the collectivism that is an officially prescribed Soviet value. In fact, the elaborate machinations of the second economy of the contrasystem require a considerable degree of civic cooperation and interdependence—in a word, "collectivism," albeit inverted and deviant. Such paradoxes are among the revelations of Konstantin Simis's sociopolitical portrait of the Soviet Union. No one interested in the Soviet Union should miss it. 