

Gorbachev and the Soviet people: cau

The small boy, dressed in khaki, leaned against a window sill, waiting to greet us. He was an ordinary-looking boy, except for the smoking cigarette he clutched in his left hand, and for the way he nervously watched for people around him. As we descended from the door of the bus, he and two other boys like him greeted us with "t-shirts?" "Change money?"

We were in Russia, largest of the Soviet Union's republics, for eight days of a three week tour through parts of northern and eastern Europe. These Leningrad boys, no more than twelve years old, were black marketeers. There were many more like them, some older, some younger, but all wanting something, particularly Western currency — hard currency — or Western clothing.

The national currency, the ruble, isolates Soviets from purchasing foreign goods, forcing them to rely on the black market or on hard currency shops. The Soviet government itself requires tourists to exchange \$10 Canadian upon entering the country, since it too needs hard currency to make foreign purchases; however, black marketeers offer much more attractive rates to encourage similar transactions, despite heavy penalties: foreigners can be deported after having all their money confiscated. Penalties for Soviets are far more severe — a guaranteed jail term. But this does not seem to deter many.

Within an hour in Leningrad one afternoon, for example, I was asked more than 15 times to change money. A few days later at breakfast in Moscow, a waiter dropped me a note which said \$10 U.S. buys you 50 rubles. (At official rates \$10 US would have bought about 12 rubles). After I said 'nyet', the head waiter then approached me three times in five minutes, twice offering to change money, and once to sell black caviar. Only after I angrily told him to let me eat my breakfast in peace did he finally leave.

Younger kids, under ten years old, wanted to trade badges for bubble gum. "Chewy?" they would ask, a handful of shiny metal badges extended. Whenever we entered a town, these youngsters could be seen chasing our bus. Within minutes of stopping, they would catch up, and while still catching their breaths, offer badges for trade. A small badge collection could be had for a pack of gum or even a single American cigarette.

Not surprisingly, the Soviets we encountered who were most proficient at speaking English were the black marketeers; and they were almost the only Soviets who freely approached us. They could be spotted at a distance. In their mismatched, often outdated western clothing, they would slip up next to you and ask to change money, sell a t-shirt, or buy your t-shirt. They seldom approached the women, however, concentrating on the men.

In Russia, women are still discriminated against, even though they are the ones who are responsible for child-rearing, buying groceries, cooking and cleaning, in addition to working full-time. Queueing for groceries alone takes an average of two hours a day. To buy food in the Soviet Union, you must go to separate shops: the bakery for bread, the delicatessen for meat, and so on. Furthermore, at each stop, you might fight through three lines — one to order, one to pay, and finally another to pick up your purchase. In all it is a long, tiring and often exasperating system. It is one more element of control, part of the Soviet system since the days of Lenin.

Everywhere we went, from hotels to museums, from the subway to the circus, police or elderly ladies stood or sat watching and waiting for someone to step out of line. Once, while waiting for an elevator in a hotel, tired from a long day in Moscow, I leaned against a well worn marble wall. An elderly lady sitting in a chair next to the



elevator began angrily chattering in my direction in Russian. I ignored her until I realized it was me she was admonishing for leaning against the wall.

If you paused too long in a museum room, an elderly lady would appear out of nowhere and chase you along; if you stared at a museum piece too long, another lady would appear and wave you away. It was at times comical, at times frustrating, but always unique.

While tourists can find plenty to occupy themselves with while visiting the Soviet Union, distractions from a strict lifestyle are hard to come by for the average citizen. Recreation and entertainment facilities, for instance, are few in number. Despite their legendary success in sports, the average Soviet can not pop down to the community skating rink or tennis court. The few sports facilities they have are reserved for those specializing in sports, not for casual recreation. Cinemas, theatres and the like are also in short supply and difficult to get tickets to.

So many simply stay at home, which is no escape either. Often more than one family occupies an apartment (there are few houses).

Depending on the size of the apartment to four or five families can be squeezed into the same living space, sometimes separated by drapes or sheets hung for privacy. The housing shortage is so severe in many areas, that it is not uncommon for divorced couples to live together for years after their separation while waiting for accommodation. In major centres like Moscow and Leningrad, the waiting lists for housing can take up to five or six years to

Improvements in the standard of living, not surprisingly, were wanted by all the people we spoke to, from housing — which is not only in short supply but in ill repair — to consumer goods, which are of poor quality and in chronic shortage. They want a steady supply and better quality. Many are displeased with the progress of Gorbachev's reforms. Gorbachev is more popular in Germany and Canada than he is to many in the Soviet Union — particularly among Soviet university students.

As more than one Soviet student told me, "Gorbachev is the product of the bureaucracy; how can we expect him to reform a very organization which created him?"

For many in the younger generation, Gorbachev is a liberal and no more. He is not a reformer. He is not a revolutionary. And he is not very popular. Nevertheless, his reforms have not all been failures. While his economic reforms have been slow, political reforms have held everyone's attention. Old and young alike were fascinated by the sessions of the new parliament in late May of this year, and by the results of reform. Russians stood transfixed in front of any available television watching the unprecedented debates. Never before had they seen their leaders ask such frank questions; never before had they seen their leaders respond with honest answers and not repression.

There is still much progress to be made in the Soviet Union. Economic and political reform is slow while a still powerful conservative rank constrains more rapid change. If Gorbachev has little room for manoeuvre, he moves too slow, the people could become increasingly dissatisfied and restless, if they are required to work harder for

