

# THE SOVIET UNION:

## PERSPECTIVE OF AN ARMY ATTACHE

by

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**I**t is probably foolhardy ever to dogmatize concerning the "truth" of what goes on in the Soviet Union. Soviet secrecy and impediments to travel multiply the difficulties of arriving at substantiated analysis. This dearth of verifiable facts provides Western Soviet "experts" with great latitude in presenting personal and possibly highly idiosyncratic opinions as the unvarnished truth.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recently criticized American diplomats and press correspondents who have served in the Soviet Union as being unfit to report on "authentic Soviet life" since life in the provinces and rural districts is hidden by an impenetrable wall. Solzhenitsyn adds: "Trips that are taken outside of Moscow are cosmetic in nature and orchestrated by the KGB."<sup>1</sup> It is true that there are vast areas of the country closed to foreigners, and many that are theoretically open are never visited because of the customary Soviet explanation, "Closed for reasons of a temporary nature."

Who, then, is a reliable source? Is it the Jewish immigrant who comes to the West with a jaundiced perception of Russia—perhaps a result of anti-Semitic persecution in both his professional and social life? Is it a Solzhenitsyn who has lived the better part of his life in the gulags? The Soviet Government would want us to pay more attention to official sources such as government, party, and press spokesmen. According to the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Anatoliy Dobrynin, there is great ignorance of his country in America: "The trouble with the

US is that you have too many specialists . . . Kremlinologists, who don't know anything about what's going on in my country and I wonder why you pay so much money to those specialists."<sup>2</sup> If his observation is true, then the Soviets have no one to blame but themselves. Their disinformation department, along with their absurd secrecy, will continue to force the West to rely on other than official Soviet sources for facts concerning that country.

Further compounding our lack of comprehensive knowledge of the Soviet Union is the absence of scientific fact-finding instrumentalities such as those employed in the West. Polls are not taken, sociological studies are seldom made, and when made the results are seldom published. As a result, the artist knows little about the worker, the worker knows little about the farmer. The man who lives in Moscow knows little of the man who lives in Kharkov or Minsk. The Party, through the media, makes certain that only those things that it wishes to convey are printed or broadcasted. National disasters, crimes, and other unpleasant happenings are rarely publicized.

The total silence on such news is hard to comprehend unless experienced. Two examples will suffice. In August 1979 I travelled for three hours in a Soviet aircraft over fields that were literally under water from flooding that had been ruining the countryside for more than two weeks. People slept for days on the floors of airports awaiting the time when they could safely return home. However, Moscow newspapers

carried nothing on the massive flooding. The only information to be obtained was from often distorted word-of-mouth accounts. The Soviet official has a simple response for the inevitable question of why the suppression of such news: "We don't want to worry people." When I asked a police officer why he carried a weapon when, judging from the absence of published crime statistics, there appeared to be no need, the answer was similar: "The people are easily scared." The officer went on to explain:

Yes, we have crimes, but advertising such crimes helps no one. We once publicized the murders of three women by an escaped, deranged person in Moscow. The result was that the news of this one man terrorized the city to such an extent that millions of people were afraid to walk the city at night.

In an odd twist, however, many Soviets believe that the crime rate is higher than it actually is because the government refuses to publish the statistics.

The Party carries the censorship of news to such an extent that educated Soviets seldom have the proper information to make adequate analyses of controversial subjects. A personal experience underscores this fact. Before assuming my attaché duties in Moscow, I was tutored in the Russian language by two ex-Soviet citizens who had left the Soviet Union in 1977, two months apart. Both had been professors at the same Soviet university. Their views, however, were totally different. One was convinced that his students, recognizing Soviet propaganda for what it was, perceived the intentional distortions and thus realized that the positive side of the Western World was never shown. As a result, according to this professor, his students believed that the West is better than it really is. In contrast, the other professor held that his students believed most of the propaganda fed to them, concluding that the West was a real jungle of anarchy and insecurity. This wide divergence of views was typical of the Soviets with whom I conversed during my period in the USSR.

Despite all the impediments, a foreigner

who is diligent in his travels and who knows the language can learn much. He can, for example, acquire a sense of the mood of the people and of the abundance or scarcity of goods. Members of the US attaché corps attempted to travel every five days to a different town. Many of us succeeded in visiting all of the 15 Soviet republics and the 16 military districts. In many ways we were better informed than the majority of the Soviet population, whose members are seldom allowed to venture outside their areas of residence and work. Relying on his own impressions plus a multiplicity of other perspectives and inputs, a student of Soviet affairs may thus be able to piece together a mosaic that begins to approximate the truth. The main conclusions yielded by my own mosaic follow below.

#### Social and Psychological

The majority of Soviets have a strong patriotic love for their country that is nourished by songs, plays, and movies whose only purpose is to increase this feeling. Soviet dissidents are not representative of any majority or substantial minority. Most Soviets are made to believe that dissidents are traitors and malcontents. Party representatives are everywhere in the factories and offices to make certain that the correct Party view of events is represented.

The Soviet Union is a country of immense contrasts. Some of its weapon systems are second to none, yet its plumbing reminds one of the Dark Ages. It can send ships to the moon but is unable to repair its own cars for lack of spare parts. The Soviet Union is not a consumer-oriented society; it is a peasant-worker bureaucratic society that provides its citizens with a minimum of creature comforts. Soviets are aware of the many products the West produces and agree that our goods are of better quality, but in the same breath they explain, "Do not be misled that because we like your jeans and music it means we like your system."

Most Soviets believe there is a great deal of unemployment, crime, and exploitation of the poor by the rich in the United States.

These same persons are satisfied, for now, that their political system provides them with free health care, cheap housing and transportation, and free education. These factors are used to advertise that socialism is superior to capitalism. The Soviets use our own literature when criticizing the United States. An example is an August 1978 *Newsweek* article that tells of thousands of American youth committing suicide because America does not provide worthwhile goals to encourage the young to keep on living.<sup>3</sup> This article was translated into Russian under the heading "Without Faith in the Future, This the Americans Say About Themselves." A young man in Siberia who read the Soviet interpretation of the article said, "Our young people smile more than yours because we have meaningful goals. We busy ourselves building bridges, roads, and hospitals, while yours are seeking ways to increase their pleasure." This man was a believer in the Soviet political system, whose views reflected only what he had been allowed to see and hear in the Soviet media. A Soviet professor in Moscow went further in describing his perceptions of US life:

If I were to give advice to the United States it would be a single one—increase morale in your people, get a positive purpose in your life. You seem to have negative purposes. Human beings must have a purpose; living is just not enough.

A Soviet student in Volgograd remarked: "The trouble with your ideology is that it does not inspire your people." The foregoing quotations are representative of the views of many Soviets. True, there are those Soviet citizens who complain about poor living conditions, lack of free access to the West, and the inefficiency of the socialist system. Of those who profess to be believers in the Soviet system, how many are true believers is difficult to judge.

### Military

The Soviets who receive political and military training from womb to tomb are, in

general, good soldiers—they are disciplined, able to withstand discomforts, and in good physical shape. The Soviet child today is the Soviet soldier of tomorrow, and he receives training that emphasizes this fact. If there is one thing that comes to mind when I think of the USSR, it is that it is not a nation but an army. All youths go through a 140-hour preinduction military training program during their high school years, and many of them wear their Physical Training Program Proficiency Badge. To earn this badge, the youth must meet standards that are similar to, with some tougher than, those for the US Army's Expert Infantryman Badge. Every third recruit receives specialist training in his high school years that qualifies him as a paratrooper, fixed- or rotary-wing aviator, radio mechanic, or motorcyclist. This means that the Soviet Army is receiving personnel into its ranks who are already at least partially trained. The degree of expertise these young men possess varies depending on the geographical area from where they were inducted. Overall, there seems to be satisfaction with the training given. In spite of possible future difficulties, the present

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system makes available all the young men needed to man the armed forces.

The Soviet explanation of why Moscow needs such a large standing army appears to possess at least some logic. It was explained to me by a Soviet colonel in this manner:

Our country is more than twice the size of the United States. The United States also has fish for neighbors in the east and west and friendly and weak nations on her northern and southern borders. We in the USSR, however, have unstable borders everywhere. In the east, we have Japan who has yet to sign a peace treaty with us. In the south, we share the longest border in the world with the People's Republic of China, an unfriendly nation. To the west we have your aggressive NATO.

The Soviets feel comfortable with this explanation, going on to claim that the elements in the military force structure safest to increase are conventional forces, since these forces do not introduce the possibility of nuclear exchanges.

In describing the weaknesses of the Soviet Army, officers in our Army sometimes emphasize that the Soviets lack a professional NCO corps. It may be, however, that we make too much of this disability. Experience in our own Army shows that assistant squad leaders can be produced from outstanding recruits who attend a tough NCO course. Some US brigades have obtained good results in Army Training and Evaluation Programs for squads commanded by gung-ho young NCOs who had attended a Brigade Recondo School. The Russian NCO corps may be equally resilient. Further, the Soviet preinduction military training and specialist training programs provide Soviet commanders with a pool of potential squad leaders. Commanders choose those recruits who have a history of excellence in their preinduction and specialist courses to attend a four- to six-month course. If the soldier completes the course satisfactorily he may be awarded the rank of junior sergeant.

The Soviet Army also uses its *praporshchiks* (similar to our warrant

officers) as first sergeants so that there is at least a continuity of experience in that position at the company level. The expertise of the junior officers appears adequate. The differences in training between newly assigned US Army platoon leaders and their Soviet counterparts are significant. The Soviets have more than 150 higher military institutes (somewhat analogous to our service academies) where the prospective lieutenant receives four to five years of training. If the lieutenant is going to be an armor officer he attends one of the armor academies. His curriculum consists of 60 percent armor instruction, 30 percent scientific subjects such as physics and mathematics, and 10 percent political instruction. The cadets generally spend one week out of every month in field training with equipment or in maneuvers. In the summer they serve with a regular army unit. When the lieutenant finally graduates after four to five years of this type of instruction, he is usually more knowledgeable than any other man in his platoon. For counseling purposes, there is a political officer. These men are found as far down as the companies and are the counterparts of our chaplains and affirmative-action officers. Further, the Party has given him the tools that lead to popularity with soldiers. To the political officer goes the responsibility for morale and recreation: setting up sports competitions and organizing dances with local girls. He also worries about the mail and busies himself with other morale activities.

## CONCLUSION

The battalion-company level leadership of the Soviet Army does not appear to possess the weaknesses we in the West have assigned it. Compared even to a good US Army combat company, the small-unit leadership of Soviet companies is in good shape.

When assessing weaknesses there is also the danger that we listen too trustingly to immigrants or escapees. These people will predictably be negative and critical. I would worry if the Soviets were to interview some of our malcontents whom we have discharged from the Army for unsuitability, or take

seriously many of the unsubstantiated reports our press publishes concerning drug and alcohol abuse in our Army. I am certain the Soviets would arrive at false conclusions from listening to these men and reading cheap journalism based on their gripes. We should thus be careful that in our desire to make the Soviet Army a less formidable competitor we do not underestimate the Soviet soldier and ascribe to him and his leaders weaknesses that

are not in fact present. We may find that he is a worthy battlefield antagonist indeed.

#### NOTES

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Misconceptions About Russia Are a Threat to America," *Foreign Affairs*, 58 (Spring 1980), 797-834.
2. Anatoliy Dobrynin, Interview on the "Today" show, NBC television, 4 November 1979.
3. "Teen-age Suicide," *Newsweek*, 28 August 1977, pp. 74-77.

