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0521348900 - Politics, Work, and Daily Life in the USSR: A Survey of Former Soviet Citizens

Edited by James R. Millar

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PART I

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# Introduction

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## CHAPTER 1

**History, method, and the problem of bias**

JAMES R. MILLAR

The Soviet Interview Project (SIP) has interviewed thousands of recent emigrants from the Soviet Union as a means of learning about politics, work, and daily life in the contemporary USSR. The project was designed by a team of Soviet specialists as a study of everyday life in the USSR with the expectation that the results will contribute not only to Sovietology but also to general theories in the basic disciplines represented by the research team – notably political science, economics, and sociology.<sup>1</sup> The initial phase of the project has involved administering highly structured questionnaires covering a wide range of topics bearing on life, work, and politics in contemporary Soviet society to a probability sample of eligible Soviet emigrants currently residing in the United States. As the principal aim has been to learn about life in the Soviet Union, the absorption process has been of interest for validation purposes only. The essays collected in this volume represent a first strike from the data set.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief history of the Soviet Interview Project, a description of the methods and procedures that have guided the SIP General Survey I, and an overview of first findings.

**History**

On August 3, 1979, a meeting was held at the Kennan Institute to promote a project to interview recent Soviet emigrants to the United States. The meeting's organizers were senior academic scholars and interested U.S.

- <sup>1</sup> The team for the General Survey consisted of James R. Millar, Project Director, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Barbara A. Anderson, University of Michigan; Donna Bahry, New York University; John Garrard, University of Arizona; Paul R. Gregory, University of Houston – University Park; Rasma Karklins, University of Illinois – Chicago; Norman Nie, University of Chicago; Brian D. Silver, Michigan State University; Michael Swafford, Vanderbilt University; William Zimmerman, University of Michigan; Aaron Vinokur, University of Haifa; Linda Lubrano, Senior Research Associate, American University; Marjorie Balzer, Senior Research Associate, Columbia University.
- <sup>2</sup> The data set has been deposited with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Institute for Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. The tape has 2,739 records, one for each respondent, and each record contains 1,446 variables. The tape also contains an SPSS-X export file.

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government specialists, some of whom had been involved in the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System of the early 1950s.<sup>3</sup> The Harvard Project was a pioneering survey effort that sought to assay the “strengths and vulnerabilities of the Soviet social system” by interviewing expatriate Russians in displaced-person camps in Allied-occupied Europe following World War II.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the seemingly unpromising character of its sample, the Harvard study is widely regarded today as a success. With funding from the U.S. Air Force, principal investigators Clyde Kluckhohn, Alex Inkeles, and Raymond Bauer of the Harvard Russian Research Center sought to learn about life under Stalin by interviewing former citizens of the USSR who had elected not to return home after the war. Most of them had had their lives in the Soviet Union disrupted ten years or so earlier by the war, and all hoped to be allowed to stay in the West.

The results of the Harvard study have withstood the test of time, including the unanticipated release of large quantities of new data on Soviet society and the opening of Russia’s borders to foreign visitors by Khrushchev after he consolidated power in the mid-1950s. Moreover, as any Soviet specialist may confirm, the Harvard Project established paradigms for the study of Soviet society that, to a surprising extent, still inform research in the West to this day.

When, in the 1970s, tens of thousands of Soviet citizens were allowed to leave the Soviet Union for West Germany and Israel, it did not take long for Western specialists to recognize the potential for Soviet studies. Between 1968 and 1984 (inclusive), approximately 265,000 persons left the Soviet Union with Israeli visas, and some 90,000 Soviet citizens of German extraction left for West Germany. Another 20,000 or so left under other auspices, including some Russian, Ukrainian, and Baltic nationalities and more than 10,000 Armenians who came almost exclusively to the United States. As time passed, an increasing proportion of those who initially were slated for Israel decided, once they were out of the USSR, to come to the United States instead. By 1986, more than 100,000 had arrived in the United

<sup>3</sup> Attendees included: James R. Millar, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Jeremy Azrael, University of Chicago; Paul Cook, Department of State; Alex Dallin, Stanford University; Maurice Friedberg, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Fred Giessler, Office of Net Assessment, Department of Defense; Gregory Grossman, University of California–Berkeley; William Manthorpe, Office of Net Assessment, Department of Defense; Norman Nie, University of Chicago; Vladimir Toumanoff, National Council for Soviet and East European Research; William Zimmerman, University of Michigan; S. Frederick Starr, Kennan Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the interviews were conducted in New York City, too. See Inkeles and Bauer 1959 (Part 1) for a more detailed description of the Harvard Project.

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States, with 35,000 former Soviet citizens arriving in 1979 alone, the largest inflow of any year. Since 1979, the rate of immigration to this country has declined sharply and in recent years has not exceeded 1,000 per year.<sup>5</sup>

Development of a major research program on the order of the Harvard Project in this country faced a number of obstacles, not least of which was the difficulty of locating financial support. The Ford Foundation had recently lowered the priority of Soviet area studies. U.S. government funds were also restricted by what was known as the Kissinger rule, after the secretary of state during the Nixon administration, who had established a personal policy against the use of federal funds for academic or government studies of recent emigrants from the Soviet Union. (He was concerned, presumably, about potential adverse effects upon the migration itself as well as with possible repercussions upon U.S.–Israeli and U.S.–Soviet relations.)

The August 1979 meeting was called following a successful lobbying effort to revise the Kissinger rule, which had remained effective policy during the first three years of the Carter administration. Some form of government funding was considered essential because survey research on the scale anticipated is very expensive and requires assured long-term financing. The agenda focused on a series of obstacles that would have to be overcome and decisions that would have to be taken to get the project under way.

First, there was the question of methodology. The Harvard Project had utilized a variety of methods, including life histories, expert testimony, and a lengthy, closed, “paper and pencil questionnaire” administered to almost 3,000 respondents. Feelings have run high ever since the Harvard Project in the Soviet field, especially among political scientists, with respect to the validity of the various methods. Disagreement over the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative research and over various survey procedures was clearly evident at this first meeting. A related, subsidiary issue involved whether or not to employ the services of a professional survey research organization.

Second, there was the question of what disciplines to include in the research team. The principal investigators of the Harvard Project included an anthropologist, a psychologist, and a sociologist. Economics, political science, and other disciplines such as history were represented either by graduate students, who served initially as interviewers and subsequently as analysts while developing dissertations with the data, or by senior consultants. In 1979, there were few anthropologists or social psychologists in the field and only a small number of trained sociologists. It was clear that

<sup>5</sup> Sources of data: telephone communication with the staff of the Conference on Soviet Jewry, New York City, and unclassified figures from U.S. Department of State (courtesy Paul Cook).

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political science and economics would play more significant roles in the current project. The Harvard study had relied primarily upon the faculty and graduate students associated with the Russian Research Center. It was presumed that the current project would be broadly based, drawing members from a variety of academic institutions.

Third, would it be possible to locate a reasonable sample? Compiling a list for the sample frame and locating the sample would depend heavily upon cooperation from resettlement agencies. Moreover, because such a high proportion of the immigrants to this country were Jewish (by some definition), cooperation was also necessary from a variety of Jewish organizations that had become involved in the outmigration of Jews from the Soviet Union and in their absorption here or in Israel. Various emigr  organizations were potentially important to the success of the project also.

Fourth, even with success in the development and location of a reasonable sample of recent Soviet emigrants, would they respond freely and candidly? Many of our consultants believed that they would not or that their innocence of survey research as Soviet citizens would make them poor subjects. There were still others who asserted that former Soviet citizens would, as respondents, fear penetration of the project by the KGB or by American intelligence agencies. It was obvious, therefore, that confidentiality would be a key factor.

Fifth, how was the project to be funded? It was understood that the federal government would be the principal funder and that the Department of Defense (DOD) would play a very substantial role as a funder. The meeting was assured "not to worry about what the sponsor was interested in." The sponsor was prepared "to trust academic judgment" regarding both methodology and substance. The general aim of the Office of Net Assessment in the Pentagon, which at that time represented the prime potential funder, was described as support for basic research into the "underlying factors and dynamics of contemporary Soviet society that will determine the future power and development of the USSR." This was a sufficiently broad and fundamental objective to pose no serious constraint upon academic formulation of the research agenda.

The real question was how to insure that the profession, the emigrants themselves, resettlement workers, and others whose cooperation was essential would perceive the project as an academic exercise and not as merely a front for official intelligence. The Harvard Project had been funded by the U.S. Air Force directly, but concerns about possible Soviet reaction to direct DOD funding for SIP and about possible adverse effects upon potential respondents made a search for alternatives desirable. The newly created National Council for Soviet and East European Research offered a

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promising vehicle for the provision of oversight for the project and a buffer between the project and the ultimate government funders.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, what should the aims of the project be? It was agreed that, regardless of the source of funding, the research agenda should be determined by academics and that the aim should be basic rather than applied research on the Soviet social system. The most fundamental question, however, was what we could and should seek to learn from what was viewed by all of us as an extremely valuable “living archive” on contemporary Soviet society but one that was at the same time badly flawed because unrepresentative of the USSR taken as a whole. It was also a highly perishable archive that needed utilization as soon as possible.

A design phase proposal was funded by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research in November 1979. During the design stage of the study, more than 100 scholars specializing in Soviet studies or in survey methodology participated in seminars on the ideal substance and survey methodology of such a project. The seminars were held all over the country during the first half of 1980 in an attempt to involve the maximum number of scholars in a variety of disciplines.<sup>7</sup> Concentrated work on the topics that could and should be treated and on the various methods available to obtain reliable information on them was conducted at the University of Illinois during the summer of 1980. The written statements that were produced at that time later formed the basis for development of the General Survey questionnaire.

To a considerable extent the research team was self-selected, for it composed itself primarily of those scholars who participated the most actively in the feasibility design seminars and who were also willing to commit themselves to a five-year project. Selection was constrained, of course, by the need to have various methodological and disciplinary skills represented and by the requirement that a variety of academic institutions be represented. The research team ultimately consisted of two economists, five political scientists, three sociologists, and one Russian literature specialist. A number of other individual scholars also contributed questions and participated in questionnaire development during formulation of the General Survey protocol.

<sup>6</sup> The National Council for Soviet and East European Research was founded in 1978 by the presidents of twelve institutions: University of California–Berkeley, University of Chicago, Columbia University, Duke University, Harvard University, University of Illinois, Indiana University, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, American Association for the Advancement of Soviet Studies, and Kennan Institute.

<sup>7</sup> For a list of attendees, see Exhibit 3-A of *The Soviet Interview Project General Survey Codebook* 1986.

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**Feasibility issues**

The two most critical issues governing feasibility were (1) whether or not we could identify and locate a sample worth interviewing, and (2) whether or not Soviet emigrants in this country would participate freely and candidly. The sample design our methodologists recommended called for maximizing analyzable heterogeneity within the sample and stratifying to reduce anomalies produced by the constraints that shaped the migration of former Soviet citizens to this country. This meant that it was essential to develop a sample frame that would be as close to a census as possible of the most recent immigrants to the United States. It followed, therefore, that we would have to have the active cooperation of the various resettlement agencies in this country that had received, placed, and continued to keep contact with the sample we required. Use of U.S. government official sources was, of course, out of the question.

We discovered that participation and candor hinged upon our ability to guarantee very strict confidentiality. Indeed, the most frequent reason given by emigrants who refused to be interviewed was the fear of adverse effect upon relatives still in the USSR and upon their chances of emigrating subsequently. In general, given assurances of confidentiality, most of our respondents were eager to participate precisely because they believed that they had valuable information on the Soviet system, which was needed to correct American misimpressions, both official and unofficial, about life in the Soviet Union.

Very rigorous confidentiality procedures were worked out with the assistance of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of the University of Chicago. The system SIP used was derived from – and more stringent than – procedures that had previously been used in survey projects to protect the identities of persons who had been interviewed about serious criminal activities, such as drug dealing, where candid participation could expose the respondent to felony criminal charges. In brief, the system involved use of a “Canadian link file” to separate name and address from case number and encryption of various case and interviewer “links.” The face sheet and all materials conveying information that might identify the respondent were separated from the questionnaire in the presence of the respondent and placed in a separate envelope for immediate mailing to the Canadian link. The questionnaire was placed in another envelope addressed to NORC. These procedures, plus rigorous training of our interviewers about the significance of confidentiality measures, were successful in generating a response rate of almost 80 percent.

Once we were confident that we could achieve a satisfactorily high response rate, it was necessary to persuade the various resettlement agencies,

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Jewish organizations, various emigrant groups, and other interested parties that the very existence of an interview project of this magnitude would not – in and of itself – provide Soviet authorities with a pretext to terminate outmigration altogether. The historical record shows that the Jewish and German-Russian emigrations from the USSR had been tied to major foreign policy issues, particularly to international economic issues (Millar 1985). On the individual level, Soviet authorities clearly exercise discretion over those who wish to leave. People whom they do not want “debriefed” by Western intelligence agencies or interviewed by the press or scholarly organizations are simply not allowed as individuals to emigrate. It was our best judgment, therefore, that SIP would not precipitate a change in Soviet policy, and most of those who were experienced with the Jewish emigration from the USSR agreed. Subsequent events substantiated this view.

Although we were ready to begin work on the questionnaire by the end of the summer of 1980 and had established the feasibility of the project, political events in Washington, D.C., put the project on ice until the fall of 1981. The principal reason for the delay was the change in national administrations, which required persuading a new set of government officials of the desirability and feasibility of the project. Thus, it was not until September 1981 that the Soviet Interview Project got under way in earnest.

**Funding**

Fortunately, during the summer of 1981 an arrangement was made by the DOD, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the State Department, with the blessings of a number of other federal departments and agencies, to fund the Soviet Interview Project through the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. The National Council was charged with oversight and quality assurance for the project as it had been proposed June 20, 1980.

The contract specified three principal goals for the Soviet Interview Project. The first was to conduct a study of contemporary Soviet society based upon interviews with recent emigrants from the Soviet Union who now live in the United States. The second was to promote the involvement of young scholars and thus to serve as a means for development of the field of Soviet studies. The third aim was to make the data and research products collected by SIP available to all interested scholars in the field simultaneously with the delivery of any and all research products to the National Council and government sponsors.

The study as proposed in June 1980 called for two complementary types of interviews. One was to be a general survey of a relatively large sample of respondents, based upon a questionnaire that would be developed in advance and would, therefore, be as “closed-ended” as possible and



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amenable to statistical analysis. The other involved a set of “expert” or special knowledge interviews, each of which would involve a limited number of “informants” who would be able to report on the way certain institutions of Soviet society are organized and how they really work. Examples of the latter are enterprise managers, jurists, and camp returnees. The studies that are reported in this volume pertain only to the SIP General Survey.

### **Questionnaire development**

Thus, in September 1981, after almost exactly a year’s hiatus, the research team began drafting the questionnaire for the General Survey. Two aspects of this process proved particularly challenging. First, the team sought to develop a truly interdisciplinary questionnaire in which, for example, political scientists’ questions would serve economists and vice versa. This was not merely a desirable goal but a necessity, because the number of questions that members of each discipline wanted to ask far exceeded the space available. The task was analogous to designing the payload of a satellite. Each experiment must be compatible with all the rest, and only so many experiments can be accommodated on board. We were forced to share variables wherever possible, therefore, which meant “selling” one’s own discipline’s variables to other team members. Space in the questionnaire was not merely allotted to team members, who would be free to use the space as they saw fit. Rather, all questions were treated as though they belonged to everybody, a policy that generated considerable interdisciplinary give-and-take.

Just as challenging was the task of paring down the list of questions suggested by the various disciplinary subcommittees of the research team and their consultants – a list that would have required interviews lasting more than a dozen hours instead of the targeted average length of three hours. Team members were obliged to write “passports” explaining the utility of each question, or set of questions, they wished to place in the questionnaire. Passports had to be quite specific, detailing the hypothesis to be tested, the relevant literature, and the frequency distributions expected for each question, and they served as a basis for discussion and decision making by the questionnaire “editing committee.”

Technical assistance in developing the questionnaire was provided by NORC. NORC staff formatted questions in accordance with established survey principles and organized the questionnaire to facilitate the flow of questions and answers. In August and October of 1982, NORC conducted two English pretests of the questionnaire with 54 English-speaking Soviet emigrants. After each pretest, the questionnaire was revised under the direction of the research team to take into account the reactions of