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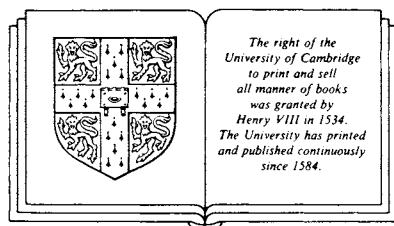
# Politics, work, and daily life in the USSR

A survey of former Soviet citizens

*Edited by*

JAMES R. MILLAR

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*



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## Foreword

American scholarship on the USSR expanded rapidly after World War II. The critical obstacle to research at the time was the paucity of data, particularly reliable data, on Soviet society. The publication of a national statistical abstract had been discontinued in the midthirties, and the last full population census dated back to 1926. Few foreigners were admitted to the country for purposes of observation, study, or research. Under those circumstances the several million former Soviet citizens living in the West were an invaluable source of information about the society that they had left during the turbulence of the war. They provided the raw data gathered by the Harvard Refugee Interview Project, which produced a set of publications that greatly enriched Western understanding of Soviet society in those years.

The volume of data available on Soviet society today is vastly greater than in those lean years. In 1956 the publication of an annual statistical abstract resumed, and three decennial population censuses have been published since then. Hundreds of foreign students and scholars have lived and worked in Soviet universities, institutes, libraries, and archives under various cultural and scientific exchange programs. Journalists and businessmen have established relationships that have enabled them to penetrate fairly intimately into parts of the society. A large volume of social and economic research by Soviet scholars on Soviet society is available in the West, as are the unofficial research and data published as *samizdat*.

Then, with detente, came a new large wave of emigration from the USSR during the 1970s. In the light of the greatly expanded volume of data available on the USSR, the question for the scholarly community was whether a large-scale survey research project on the new emigrants was worth the effort and expense. After a period of extensive discussion in government and academic circles, the answer was clear. Although the volume of Soviet data and other information is far greater than in the dark postwar years, it is still very much less than that which is available on most Western societies. It also contains large gaps on matters that Western scholars regard as interesting aspects of societies in general and of the USSR in particular. It was that view that led to the organization of the Soviet Interview Project (SIP), from which this collection of papers has emerged as a first installment.

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The differences between the Harvard Project and SIP reflect the remarkable change in the state of Soviet studies in the quarter-century between them. In the young field of the late 1940s, for example, there were very few professors and many graduate students; in the mature field of today there are many professors and relatively fewer graduate students. Consequently, a great deal of the work of the Harvard Project was conducted by graduate students gathering material for dissertations, under the direction of a few senior scholars. Virtually all the work of SIP, by contrast, was conducted by experienced scholars, many with substantial records of published research. The difference mirrors the change in the state of the Soviet studies, from one in which the incremental contribution of Ph.D. dissertations was substantial to one in which it is now relatively modest.

The two projects also span the period that Soviet writers used to call the scientific-technical revolution. The Harvard Project prided itself in using state-of-the-art data-processing technology, which consisted of a shiny new IBM card sorter housed in an office called the “shop.” Chi-squares and correlation coefficients were produced by fast new Monroe calculators with what seemed like machine-gun speed. A quarter-century later, survey research data collection and management had become so technical a business that SIP decided to employ the services of a specialized research service organization: the National Opinion Research Center. The new computer technology made it possible for SIP analysts, like contemporary quantitative analysts generally, to employ methods that were infeasible in the past. Multivariate regression techniques, for example, which are widely employed in the papers in this volume, were far beyond the capacity of even the fastest Monroe calculators of that time.

Survey research itself was a young discipline in the postwar years, and the Harvard Project was at the cutting edge of the art, through both its own personnel and the consultants upon whom it drew for counsel and criticism. That edge has done a lot of cutting in the intervening years, however, and is far less accessible to the nonspecialist than in the past. The training of the graduate student interviewers (it was my good fortune to be one of them) occupied a considerable number of sessions and produced interviewers who regarded themselves as quite sophisticated in the art. That training time, however, was but a fraction of that which NORC requires today to produce interviewers competent in the art as it has developed to this time.

One major difference involves not the passage of time but the logistics of interviewing. Most of the postwar emigrants had been living for some time in temporary “displaced persons camps” in Germany and neighboring countries. They were easy to locate, and they had a surfeit of time on their hands. The opportunity to tell the story of their lives to a sympathetic outsider was a welcome diversion. In contrast, the SIP respondents were



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scattered all over the United States. Most of them were living active lives and holding full-time jobs, and did not regard it as a great privilege to give up a couple of nights for the sake of science. Consequently, the time and cost of locating respondents and persuading them to be interviewed were much greater. The Harvard interviewers were able to spend two to three days with each respondent, whereas the SIP interviews consisted on average of one three-hour session. SIP, however, conducted personal interviews with a much larger number of respondents.

In one dominating respect, however, the two projects are quite similar, despite the passage of time. Both had to confront the crucial question of whether reliable knowledge about Soviet society can be obtained from the testimony of people who must be regarded as hostile to the political system.

The Harvard Project had a somewhat easier task. Many of its respondents had not left the USSR voluntarily because of disaffection with the system; some had been prisoners of war, and some had been seized by the German authorities in occupied Soviet territory and shipped to Germany or Austria as involuntary laborers. Almost all the SIP respondents, however, had left voluntarily, and some had faced harsh sanctions for having announced their wish to emigrate. Second, the Harvard Project respondents were almost all Slavic, mostly Great Russian by nationality. The SIP respondents, in contrast, come predominantly from the Jewish nationality, which is a small minority in the USSR that suffers from discrimination. Fortunately, there is a sufficient number of respondents of other nationalities to provide a basis for assessing the extent to which the responses and experiences of the Jewish respondents may differ from those of other nationalities.

Both projects devoted a massive effort to the detection of bias of various sorts in the testimony of the respondents. The wide acceptance of the findings of the Harvard Project signified that the scholarly community by and large was persuaded that their testimony, as analyzed by researchers sensitized to the problem of bias, did provide an acceptable basis for drawing inferences about the parent Soviet society. SIP had available the accumulated experience of several additional decades of survey research in dealing with bias, which will be evident in the papers in this volume. The Harvard Project, for example, devoted considerable attention to the precision of the translation of its interview questions from English into Russian, but it did not have available the “double-blind translation” method employed here. With the care and ingenuity with which the SIP researchers dealt with the bias problem, as set forth in these essays, they have good reason to expect that their data will be regarded as a reasonable basis for the inferences they have presented here about Soviet society.

Perhaps more important than the inferences that are drawn about Soviet

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society are the inferences that are deliberately not drawn. The proportion of respondents who accept regime norms, for example, provides no basis for an estimate of the proportion of the parent Soviet population that accepts regime norms. However, the finding that older people in the sample are more likely than younger people to accept regime norms, other things equal, does support the inference that a similar relation between age and acceptance of regime norms is to be found in the Soviet population. That is an important finding about Soviet society, although it tells us far less than could be learned if it were possible to survey the Soviet population itself.

The findings in any research project reflect the questions that the analysts seek to answer. Those questions emerge from the state of knowledge and the research agenda at the time. In the postwar years Western views were heavily influenced by Soviet claims about the nature of their own society. Those claims were challenged by critics abroad, but the research base for assessing the controversies was very small, because of both the paucity of reliable data and the small number of researchers with the requisite language and analytic skills. The Harvard Project provided a unique opportunity to develop a body of data for illuminating that debate.

A central question at the time was the extent to which the abolition of private ownership of the means of production had eliminated the basis of the division of society into social classes, as Marx predicted and as the Soviets claimed. Was it in fact a society of a new kind, unlike those with which we are familiar, in which social class is the predominant predictor of life chances, lifestyle, attitudes, and so forth? A major thrust of the project was the exploration of that issue, and the conclusion was strikingly clear. On question after question the variable that best explained the distribution of responses was social class – not nationality, not age or sex, but social class. In most respects Soviet society reflected the characteristics of a class society of the Western industrial kind. That conclusion is perhaps the principal contribution of the Harvard Project to the advance of knowledge at the time.

It is therefore worthy of note that social class does not emerge in this volume as a major analytic variable. The largest differences among groups in the SIP sample are those between the younger and the older. Education, occupation, income, sex, and nationality distinctions also show up, but it is age differences that dominate the social fabric.

Like the dog that didn't bark, the variable that does not appear may provide the clue to an interesting difference in the state of knowledge at that time and now. Several conjectures may be offered. First, the Harvard Project contributed decisively to the advancement of knowledge by settling the question that occupied center stage at the time; the class nature of Soviet society became the conventional wisdom, and the question disappeared from

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the agenda of subsequent research. It is simply no longer an interesting question. Second, the subject of social class, which occupied so central a role in general sociological theory and research a few decades ago, is perhaps no longer at the core of disciplinary interest. Third, contemporary data-processing power may have diminished the usefulness for social research of so aggregative a concept as social class. Traditional measures of social class like socioeconomic status scales consisted of a set of scores on such underlying variables as education, income, occupation, and so forth. It is now so easy and inexpensive to investigate the separate effects of those variables that little is gained by the use of the composite measure (I am indebted to Paul Gregory for this interpretation). It is a mark of the passage of time and of the advance of knowledge that a curiosity about the influence of social class on Soviet society reveals not one's knowledge but one's age.

The Harvard Project researchers enjoyed some of the advantages and excitement of pioneering; one did not have to be particularly ingenious to discover or explore a new terrain at that time. The age of pioneering, however, has long been over. As in all developed fields of endeavor, genuinely new contributions are rare, and it takes greater talent and training to find an important new property of a society that so many earlier researchers had overlooked. Therefore, one should not read this book in the expectation of finding startling new insights into Soviet society that had somehow escaped the microscopes of several generations of dissertation and monographic research. One should expect rather to find those kinds of insights that could not be obtained or verified by any methods other than the surveying of substantial numbers of people who have been members of the society. The Harvard Project and SIP are the only two bodies of data in the world (excluding the USSR, though possibly including it as well) to have produced the kind of data that could support those insights.

The finding that will perhaps attract the greatest attention, as reported by James R. Millar in his introduction, is the remarkable reversal in the relation between age and support for the regime that occurred between 1940 and 1980 (the years on which the two projects focused attention). In the earlier period it was the younger who were most supportive and the older who were most hostile. In 1980 it was the other way around. Another striking finding is the extent to which education level has come to dominate the factors determining social position and attitudes. In question after question, education level emerges as the variable that explains the largest proportion of the variation in responses. Education, of course, was a major component of the social class variable that occupied a similar dominant role in the Harvard Project study, so that there may not have been so great a change in this respect. However, the gradual attenuation of the significance

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of such characteristics as one's social origin, which played an important role before the war, may well have elevated education to the dominating position that this study finds it to occupy today.

The political significance of this finding is that education, like age, bears a strong negative relation to support for the regime. As Brian Silver's analysis reveals, however, given the level of education, support for the regime *increases* with income level. Coming at a time when a new leader has undertaken to transform Soviet society, these and other SIP findings will provide a valuable basis for the assessment of the prospects for that program of reform.

What counts as a contribution to knowledge is to a great degree a matter of taste. For scholars of a more intuitive disposition, many of the findings will be regarded as not interesting because they are not new. The intuitionist needs no survey research project to inform him that Soviet youth are hostile to the regime; any reader of Soviet novels, or even *Pravda*, knows that is true, as does anyone who has lived in the society. Well, says the survey researcher, maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. And if it is, is it as true of female youth as of male youth? And is it as true of highly educated male youth as of less educated? And among the more highly educated male youth, is it more true of those who earn higher income than of those who earn less? The intuitionist may find something of interest in questions like these that are explored in this volume, but he may be more interested in the second set of SIP studies, which are based on in-depth interviews with emigrants with particular experiences, such as factory management or the law. The results of those studies will begin to appear shortly.

Twenty-five years elapsed between the first emigrant interview project and the second. Will there be a third, sometime in the next millennium? If Secretary General Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, of openness, plays itself out, there may never be a third. If the time comes when Soviet scholars are free to design their own research projects, there is no doubt that they would undertake to look into the social structure of their own society as scholars around the world look into their own. If that research were published, there would be no need for foreign scholars to do that work, much less with such unrepresentative respondents as emigrants. Extracting valid results from a biased sample is an intriguing exercise, but no one would mourn if it never needed to be done again.

JOSEPH S. BERLINER

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