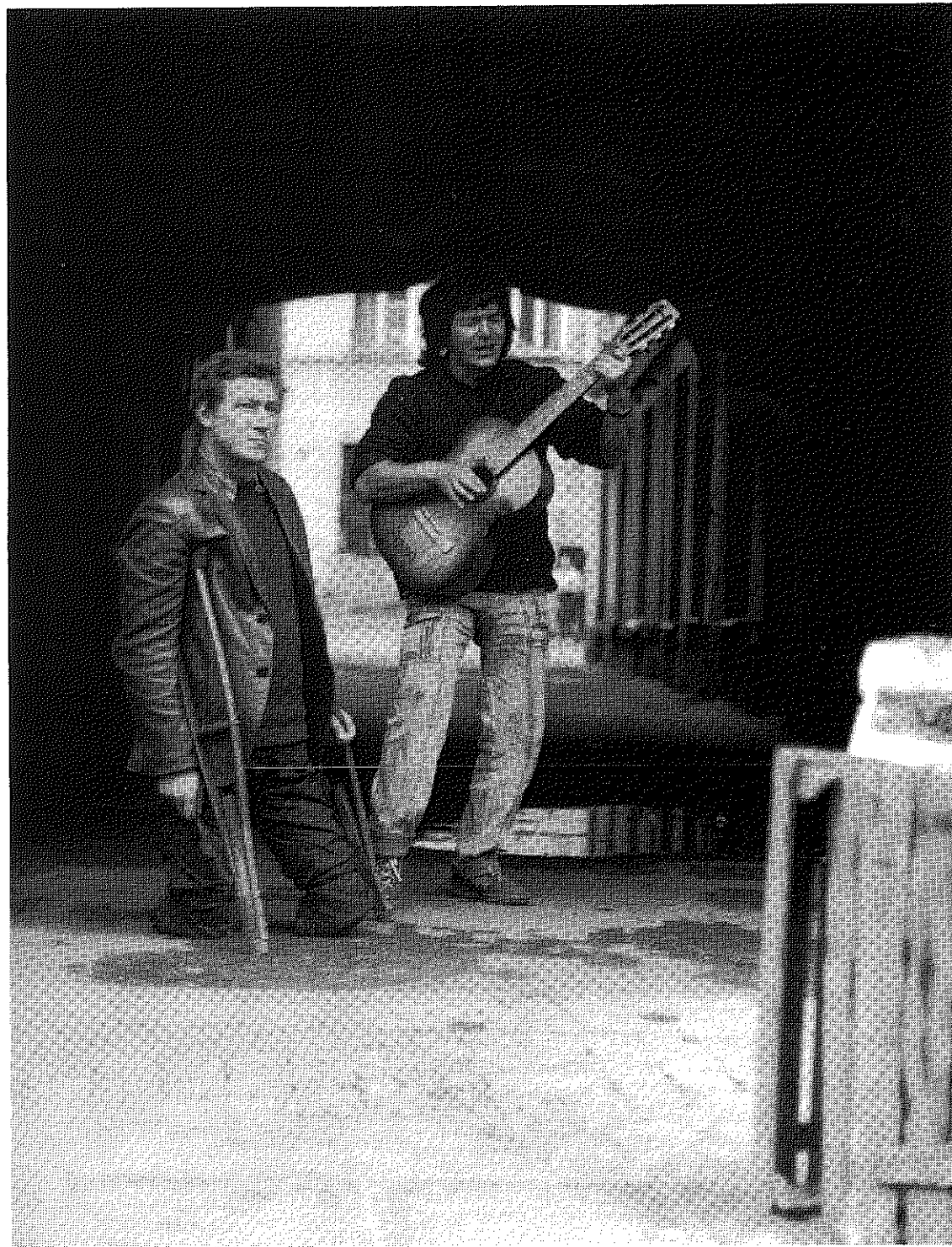


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The ulture of Glasnost

In June 1990, political science professor Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, Assistant to the President of the Canadian Autoworkers Union, toured the USSR at the invitation of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In order to "discern the nature and tendency of the reforms in [Soviet] political institutions and the economy," Panitch and Gindin travelled to the industrial centres Togliatti and Yaroslavl, and to Moscow where they met with intellectuals, journalists, political leaders, activists and the people in the streets.



It is hardly surprising that in the process of profound transition the Soviet Union is going through (some of the most acute analysts and participants we talked to were ready to describe it as a revolution), it is the manifold problems and conflicts that attend such an era that now capture the headlines.

But amidst the attention deservedly paid to each and every new manifestation of crisis, one may take for granted or even lose sight of the most important change that has taken place in the Gorbachev era. Certainly what is immediately most striking for someone visiting the Soviet Union today after a long absence is the breadth and depth of "glasnost," the regime of "openness" associated with Gorbachev's coming to power.

There is in the Soviet Union today a remarkable discursive openness which stands in sharp contrast to the strong sense of constraint a visitor could palpably feel disfiguring even private conversation in the earlier era. Now there was a no less palpable absence of constraint (on both sides) in the discussions we had with a very broad array of people: from neo-classical economists to Trotskyist sociologists; from the political editor of *Commerçant* ("Russia's business weekly") to the Deputy Head of the international department of the Central Committee of the Communist party; from local union leaders to the workers we met on the assembly line.

This absence of constraint is of course visible in the confusing (and often just

plain confused) profusion of independent movements, parties and groups that have emerged and are still taking form. They reflect the high degree of politicization in Soviet society today. Indeed, one sociologist said that Soviet society was increasingly polarizing into two camps, defined in terms of their positive or negative orientations to the politicization itself. On one side are the "activists"; on the other are the "active non-activists," whose insistence on their right to be left alone to tend their own garden has to be no less militantly asserted in the face of the overall trend to politicization.

Moscow itself is alive with the street culture of glasnost. Outside the offices of *Moscow News* there are always about a hundred people debating politics, amidst a profusion of hawkers of crudely printed newspapers ("Read all about it: How much Raisa Gorbachev costs the people!"). One also comes across knots of people in subway tunnels and streets grabbing up such newspapers. Some of these papers are religious, some are pornographic, yet all of them are politicized if only by virtue of their relatively unhindered distribution.

To be sure, the street culture of glasnost is as commercial as it is political. The profusion of craft and artist stalls on the Arbat or at Ismaelovsky Park gives Moscow some of the vibrancy that was so notably absent in the past. This directly blends with some of the most unsavory aspects of the kind of market freedom we know in the West. There are near the Arbat many beggars attempting to scrounge a few kopeks by turning pity for their physical handicap or the visible impoverishment of their children into some sort of exchange value. Rather more pleasantly interspersed among the stalls are many buskers, such as a jazzband playing with gusto Dixieland renditions of Glen Miller's greatest hits. (The quality of their music is actually much higher than the no less derivative rock music videos that occupy all the airspace on daytime television.)

Reflecting a far more traditional aspect of Russian culture, a much larger crowd gathers amidst the stalls to hear a poet declaim his verses in the richest of Russian tones. His poems are all political and all splenetically anti-regime. One anti-Gorbachev poem in particular, in which he does a quite brilliant satirical take-off of the man himself, produces rapture from the crowd. The crowd includes a clutch of young men in militia uniform who, far from taking notes or making arrests, display in their laughter and applause as much appreciation of the poet's sentiments as everyone else.

Thus does the politics of glasnost blend with the commercialism of glasnost. Indeed, among the crafts on the stalls themselves the hottest new commodity,

produced by hundreds of political-artistic entrepreneurs in an array of styles ranging from the most crudely painted to some of high artistic quality, is the "Gorby" doll. Like the traditional matrushka, it opens up to reveal a succession of dolls inside. Inside Gorbachev one invariably finds first Brezhnev (usually bedecked in his military medals), then Krushchev (the one we bought is carrying a shoe), then Stalin (ours has a pipe in one hand and, held behind his back, a bloody dagger in the other), then, finally, inside Stalin, there is always a tiny Lenin, looking sage or stunned, benevolent or evil, according to the whim, ideological orientation or sense of consumer demand of the dollmaker.

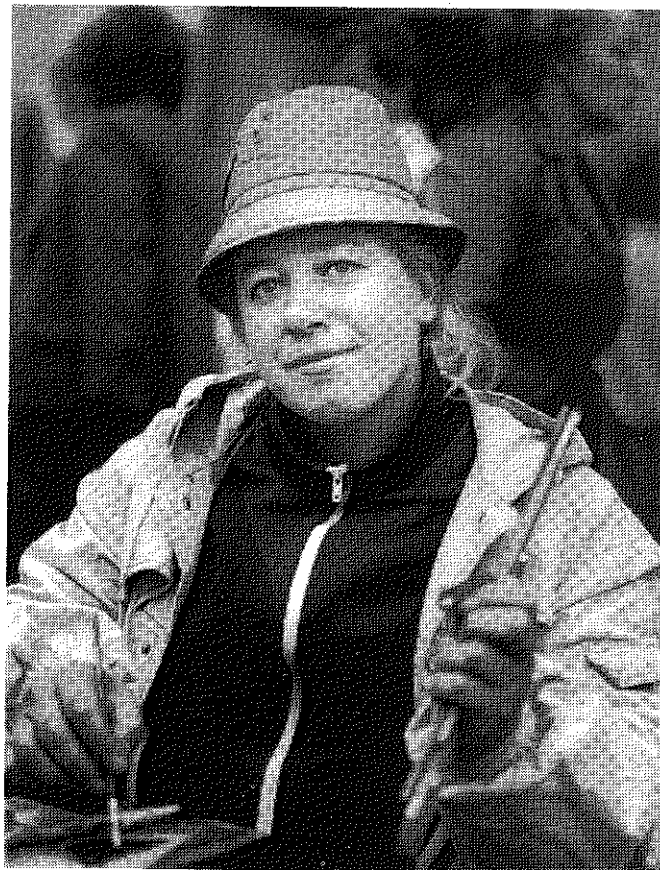
Guardian correspondent Jonathan Steele has bought a doll that goes even further: inside Lenin is Czar Nicholas, and inside Nicholas, Peter the Great. He claims that he has seen others which have a tiny proletarian inside Lenin, and inside him, a traditional Russian *muzhik!*

As already may be gleaned, Gorbachev is little revered (to put it mildly) in this street culture of glasnost. Muscovites especially (one hears this less in Togliatti or Yaroslavl) are disdainful of the adulation they sense he was accorded on his recent trip to our own country. The things for which we would give him credit, for inaugurating glasnost itself or for a foreign policy explicitly designed to undo the knots in which the world has been tied by Cold War attitudes and structures, don't seem to impress people at home. Instead one hears the lament (more often the complaint) that after five years he has "done nothing." What is meant by this is, first of all, that he has accomplished nothing to improve the domestic economic situation, above all the economy of consumer shortages; and, second, that the system of privileges for the bureaucratic-administrative elite, the old Communist *nomenklatura*, still remains in place. Yeltsin's popularity rests largely on his insistent speaking to this latter theme.

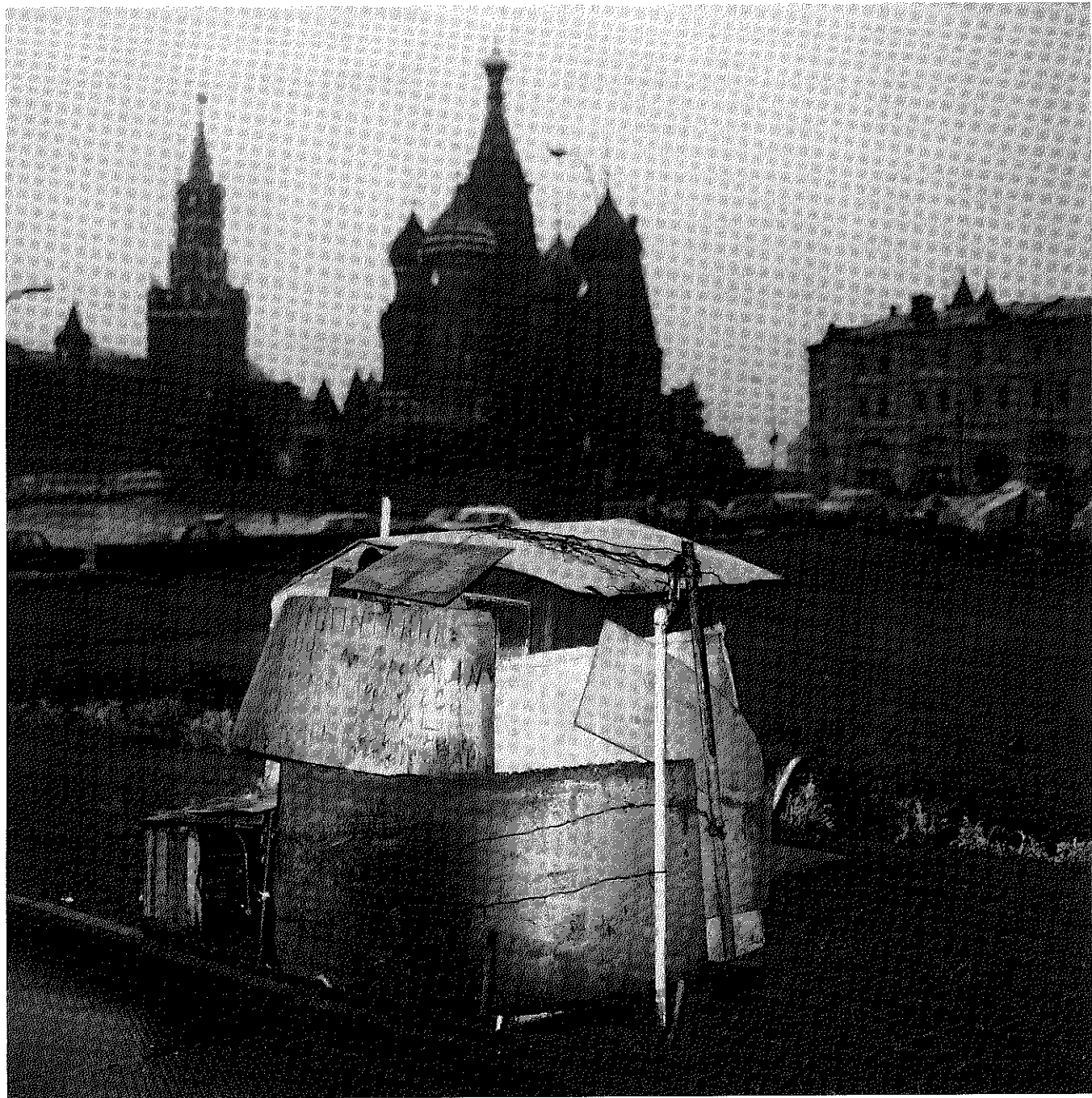
It is not actually clear that most people's standard of living has fallen under Gorbachev. When directly asked, most people say they are not worse off in terms of how much they are able to obtain for consumption, only that they have to devote more time to getting things, or that some goods disappear inexplicably from the shops for a month or two (such as soap last winter, when — such is the irrationality of the extreme centralization of production — a major soap factory temporarily closed down for retooling). The lines we saw at food shops were not as long as we had been led to expect by newspaper reports in the West, although this may have just reflected how little there was to buy or the effect of resident restriction on sales. At the Moskova department store where we went to buy a suitcase (one of ours arrived destroyed in transit), we not only found a good number of perfectly adequate ones to choose from, but amidst a large midday crowd of shoppers ranging over four storeys, there were

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photographs by David Hlynsky



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long queues for only three of the many hundreds of goods on sale. One of these was for women's shoes, another for western-looking sweat suits. Much of the complaint relates to the quality and style of goods, which are, at best, of a western mass discount house or flea market variety.

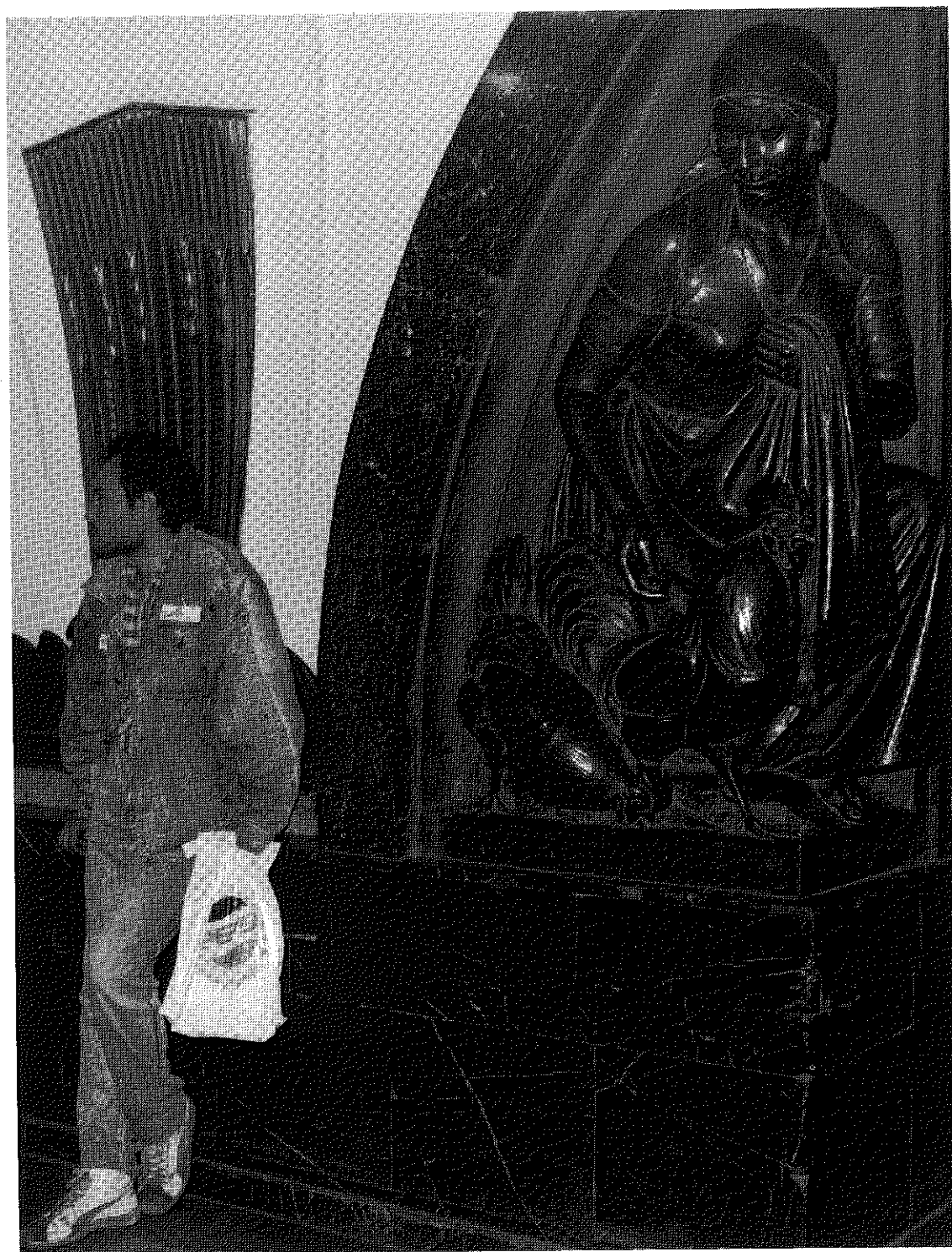
What is rarely made clear in the West is that, apart from the city shops, there is also the system of distribution in the place of work, although the mix of goods available, and the quality thereof, varies considerably. Somewhere between ten and 20 percent of a family's consumption may be available through this, but in a few places much more. In Togliatti, for instance, there is no consumer crisis. The enter-

prise shops, run by the autoworkers' union, are full. But this is due to the direct access the Vaz enterprise has to foreign currency through the export of cars to the West. Most enterprises elsewhere, even those that produce final goods for export, don't have the same degree of independence and the foreign currency is absorbed and then selectively meted out by the central ministries.

Goods are also available through the new legal informal economy and the (still somewhat illicit) "shadow economy." Food prices are high in the large Kolkhoz markets which are dotted through Moscow, where farmers bring the goods they produce on private plots, but the quantities are plentiful, and the quality higher than in the state or most enterprise shops. The new cooperatives (private enterprises in everything but name) also sell a variety of goods and services at high prices. Since most people have savings equal to a year or two in income (which they will normally use to buy a major consumer item like a car when it becomes available), they can dip into this to purchase from the high price alternate economy to supplement their consumption from city or enterprise shops.

People, especially Muscovites, see the American consumer culture as "normal" (this is a word much used to describe what people want — "a normal society," "a normal economy," "a normal life") and by this is mainly meant how they perceive most people to live in the United States. There is a strong sense of inferiority to all things American. People especially feel humiliated by their experience as consumers. "We feel this every time we go to the store," Len Karpinsky of *Moscow News* told us. The failure to catch up to America through a statist mode of parallel development has led to a widespread determination to catch up through emulating the American way.

But the American way is a composite of many things. And one sometimes feels that what they may be heading for could well look like the Chicago gangsterland in the 1920s that Brecht so brilliantly used as a backdrop to satirize the roots of fascism in his play *Arturo Ui*. The culture of glasnost has opened new space for corruption, even as it has led to the exposure (and some prosecution) of some of the more sordid corrupt practices of high officials. As a means of coping with consumer shortages, petty appropriation was always commonplace and remains so. To see, as we did at the airport waiting for our flight to Togliatti, an employee of the restaurant going home from work with three very large cellophane bagfuls of tomatoes, represented nothing new except for the brazenly open manner in which she did this. Nor in a domestic consumer market where foreign currency has long been the



effective king (not only in the shadow economy but in the government-run Beriozka shops where western goods were and are still available only in foreign currency) is it anything new for the western visitor to be offered roubles or goods at a high rate of exchange for dollars; only the minimal surreptitiousness with which this is now done is reflective of glasnost. But the half-way house that cooperatives occupy between the market and statist modes of distribution has created new forms of corruption. We were assured by two knowledgeable economists, both very pro-market, that the recent shortages in the state shops have much more to do with corruption than anything else. According to one example: 500 pounds of meat arrives at a state-run shop and 300 pounds of it will immediately be sold illicitly at a premium by the manager to a "cooperator," leaving only 200 pounds (or less depending on what informal system exists for the employees to get their take for themselves or friends and relatives) for general distribution in the state shop at the low official price.

There is indeed much loose talk in Moscow of the mafia as a power in the land, thriving in this halfway house. This seemed to confirm the boasts of one proud self-proclaimed gangster sitting at the hotel restaurant table beside us on our first night in Moscow, who ventured to inform us that the most important thing we needed to understand about his country was that nobody obeyed the law — that the system only worked insofar as everyone broke the law. We wondered, that first night of our trip, when one prostitute telephoned directly to our hotel room at 1:30 a.m., and another at 5:00 a.m. ("You Canada? Very nice! I come to your room?"), whether this was the pimp who ran the scam of paying the front desk of the trade union hotel to inform him of the telephone numbers of the rooms occupied by the foreigners who registered each day. When we related this the next day to our union host, he said he had complained of this before, but been threatened with his union having difficulty placing guests in the hotel.

We also tell the story later, at the office of the new Socialist Party. It is a tiny room in the Rossiya Hotel looking directly over the Kremlin. The office is run by Yuri Ostromov. He is extremely thin and pale, looking every inch like a throwback to a young Menshevik in 1910. But this image is an incongruous one as we watch him constantly answering the telephone, computer on his lap, fax machine at his elbow, with the television across the room emanating its never-ending rock videos. ("Why are you watching this stuff?" "There is nothing else on.") The party's founder, the Marxist intellectual and Moscow City Soviet deputy, Boris Kagarlitsky, arrives as we are relating the incident with the prostitutes at the hotel and he finds the scam rather humorous. In a country with a terrible service sector, he quips, we had been offered the best of what that sector had to offer. He is much more interested that we are leaving that



night for Togliatti and Yaroslavl. Yuri promises to consult their computerized lists to put us in touch with contacts in those cities, and both of them bade us to report on whomever we might find there on our own that the party might be likely to recruit for its campaign for democratic socialism. Glasnost has many faces. ♦

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