

Forms of Social Solidarity in Russia and the Soviet Union

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Traditional interpretations of Russian society rest on a contrast between Russian authoritarianism and the liberties of western societies. According to these interpretations Russia right up to the twentieth century was a 'patrimonial monarchy', in which there was no distinction between sovereignty and ownership, so that the tsar's subjects were literally his slaves. Mikhail Speranskii, the early nineteenth century statesman and reformer, is often quoted in support of this contention for his comment that Russia had only two social estates, 'slaves of the sovereign and slaves of the landlords'.¹

There is no denying the highly authoritarian nature of the Russian state, and in its twentieth century hypostasis its unique capacity to penetrate and affect the lives of ordinary people. But the image of slavery is overdone and partly misleading. Even in an authoritarian state individuals and groups are not merely passive implementers of commands: they try to defend their aspirations and advance their interests. In doing so they form links with one another, either in the interstices of the official structure or by infiltrating and partly appropriating official institutions. The result is that the state's intentions become distorted and even partly undermined. The aspirations of the subaltern groups are not realised either, so that the outcome is unsatisfactory for both sides.

In a recent account of Soviet society under Stalin, Sheila Fitzpatrick concludes that it can best be understood by reference to four types of western institutions: a prison, a conscript army, a strict boarding school

¹ Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime*, Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1977, 64-79; quotation on p 105.

or a soup kitchen.² None of these are nurseries of civic freedom or the rule of law. At least in the first three, however, inmates, conscripts or pupils are not completely helpless: they usually have their own informal contacts with colleagues, with whom they have interests in common, and whom they trust far more than they do the authorities. In that way they generate networks which cushion, attenuate or frustrate commands handed down from above.

In his study of Magnitogorsk in the 1930s, Stephen Kotkin showed that the Soviet state failed to meet its targets either for industrial output or for providing the population with housing, medical care and other promised social security benefits. So the city's dwellers had to respond by improvising their own arrangements, sometimes through associations of immigrants from the same rural area, or simply through casual groups of neighbours offering each other mutual aid in order to survive. They would cover up for each other in devising petty forms of resistance: absenteeism, low quality work, pilfering. Kotkin speaks of 'intricate encounters, conflicts and negotiations that took place in and around the strategy of state-centred social welfare in its extreme or socialist incarnation'.³ The word 'negotiations' does not seem to me appropriate here, since it implies interaction between roughly equal partners, but Kotkin is right in showing how a kind of 'counter-society' emerged, interacting with authority structures, always at a disadvantage, but able nevertheless to modify official intentions so much that the whole society became difficult to govern, and impossible to move decisively in the direction of the party's great project of building socialism. Even the state's information monopoly was weakened: the queues generated by

² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 226-7.

³ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a civilisation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 23.

official failures became forums for the exchange of information and ideas banned in the mass media.⁴

Such interactions between authority and informal social organisations are not peculiar to the Soviet period. Russians' historical experience has taught them to improvise arrangements that work well for small groups. Over the centuries their state has mobilised them for the great tasks of empire, but has usually done so on the basis of minimal resources and using official mechanisms of command and control which do not work well in practice and have to be supplemented or replaced by personal relationships, sometimes hierarchical, sometimes egalitarian. So Russians devise their own methods of getting things done, and those methods, naturally enough, have in mind above all the interests of those operating them rather than the demands of the state. Small groups and social networks come into being and consolidate themselves, sometimes advancing the purposes of the state, but at least as often frustrating them. Either way, they have played a crucial and often unrecognised role in the history of Russian society.

If one makes a crude distinction between traditional and modern societies, then one may say that in traditional societies the main contexts of social interaction, and therefore of trust or distrust, were kinship and the local community, that is, persons with whom one was closely and continually linked, and that the ideological underpinning of such interactions was religious cosmology and tradition. These contexts also provided the ideology and/or the mechanisms by which people coped with risk and uncertainty. In modern societies, on the other hand, the interchanges of kinship and local community have been largely replaced by more long-distance, impersonal and instrumental interchanges which take place in the context of institutions having their own procedures and

⁴ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 238-256; he makes a comparison with de Soto here – mention it?

practices, while religious cosmology and tradition have largely been supplanted by 'reflexively organised knowledge, governed by empirical observation and logical thought and focused upon material technology and socially applied codes.'⁵

These changes have generally been accompanied by the 'civilising process' described by Norbert Elias. He hypothesised that the centralisation of the state was usually accompanied by social processes in which the radius of trust was broadened away from family and immediate community towards a wider society. This entailed more complex and widespread interaction with unfamiliar human beings, facilitated by impersonal law codes, complex economic systems, the division of labour and the spread of polite modes of behaviour usually originating in a monarchical court.⁶

In Russia the creation of the central state was not accompanied by the emergence of impersonal social institutions of that kind. The basic reason is that, for geo-political reasons, the Russian state had to mobilise the resources of population and nature to defend and administer its growing but vulnerable territories at a much earlier stage than any other European country, and hence employed much more primitive instruments. Already from the late fifteenth century Muscovy was no longer a vassal territory of the Mongols, and was gearing itself up both to confront the dangers and to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the open frontiers to its east and south. The Grand Duchy of Muscovy and its successors accomplished that mobilisation by making use of the levers at its disposal: those were the sinews of kinship and of local communities scattered throughout its territories, and the ties of

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, 79-111; quote on p 106; Barbara A. Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, ?**.

⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process* (translated by Edmund Jephcott), 2 volumes, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978-82.

personal dependency which bound them to local elites. The result was a kind of pre-Eliasian 'statisation of personal power'⁷, in which village or town communities rendered service to the state, in particular paid taxes and provided recruits, at the command of the leading persons in and just above those communities. The communities governed themselves according to their own local traditions and in the context of an overall religious cosmology partly supplied by the Orthodox Church. Their links to the state were tenuous and were mediated almost entirely by persons rather than institutions, laws or codified practices.⁸

Russia's imperial mobilisation was extremely successful. It provided the foundation for a huge and highly diverse empire which survived in one form and another from the mid-sixteenth to the late twentieth century, though one could say it was running into serious crises from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Precisely because it was so successful, there was no decisive pressure to change the system, to cease reliance on persons and to erect stable institutions in their place. Of course the Russian state did have, at least in appearance, functioning institutions – zemskii sobor, later Senate, State Council, ministries, etc – but several historians have argued that in practice they too were largely vehicles for the personal power of their leading figures.⁹ In the Soviet period personal domination continued, but mediated through the nomenklatura personnel appointments system administered by Communist Party committees at the various levels of its hierarchy. In this way, arrangements needed

⁷ I derive this term from M.N. Afanas'ev, *Klientelizm i rossiiskaia gosudarstvennost'*, Moscow: Tsentr konstitutsionnykh issledovaniï moskovskogo obshchestvennogo nauchnogo fonda, 1997, 85.

⁸ This theme is explored at length in Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: a history*, London: Penguin Press, 2001.

⁹ George L. Yaney, *The Systematisation of Russian Government: evolution in the domestic administration of Russia, 1711-1905*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973; John P. LeDonne, *Absolutism and Ruling Class: the formation of the Russian political order, 1700-1825*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Geoffrey Hosking, 'Patronage and the Russian state', *Slavonic & East European Review*, vol 78 (2000),

centuries ago to create and sustain empire have long outlasted their function and become an obstacle to social cohesion in a more complex society.¹⁰

At the base of the Russian power structure throughout the tsarist centuries was the village commune, and so I shall focus on it for the first part of my paper. In the Soviet Union both home and workplace functioned as mediators of power: I shall concentrate especially on the Soviet enterprise and the communal apartment as twin arenas of the daily lives of the majority of the country's townspeople.

The Village Commune

The basic concept underlying the functioning of the village commune was *krugovaia poruka*, literally 'circular surety', but perhaps better translated as 'joint responsibility'. Its origins are impenetrable, but had something to do with the need to preserve consensus within isolated and vulnerable rural communities. Their members had to accept shared responsibility for preventing crime and apprehending criminals, for the upkeep of common facilities such as roads, bridges and stores and for settling conflicts within the community. Joint responsibility began as a social custom, but was adopted by the state as an administrative device, through which it could ensure that crime was restrained, taxes were collected and recruits were delivered to the army: if one household failed to fulfil its obligations, then the other households had to make up the

¹⁰ Mikhail Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: anatomy of the Soviet ruling class*, London: Bodley Head, 1984; Gerald Easter, *Reconstructing the State: personal networks and elite identity in the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

shortfall. That was very convenient for tax collectors and recruiting sergeants.¹¹

Both as social custom and as administrative device, joint responsibility had profound implications for village life and for the peasants' attitude to law, property and authority. It especially affected their treatment of the land. Peasants believed that the land was God's and did not belong to any human being. It was a resource available to all who cultivated it and their dependents, according to need. In many areas, from the seventeenth century onwards, because land was scarce, it would be periodically redistributed among households to reflect changing family size. The tax burden on each household would be readjusted accordingly. Individual households had the usufruct, and cultivated the land independently, but ownership of the land was vested in the community as a whole. Even after the money economy became generally accepted, during the nineteenth century, and peasants began to buy and sell land, they continued to assume, perhaps incongruously, that a basic minimum would always be available to them should they need it, especially in emergencies, such as war, revolution or famine.¹²

Preserving peace and maintaining joint responsibility required an open and accessible decision-making process. This was the function of the skhod, or village assembly, which normally consisted of all heads of households – and therefore entirely of men. It elected from among its own members a starosta or elder, who chaired meetings, saw to the implementation of decisions, and liaised with the outside world and especially with the authorities. The starosta would normally take up his

¹¹ Horace W. Dewey & Ann Kleimola, 'From the kinship group to every man his brother's keeper: collective responsibility in pre-Petrine Russia', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, vol 30 (1982), 321-335.

¹² L.V. Milov, *Velikoruskii pakhar' i osobennosti rossiiskogo istoricheskogo protsessa*, Moscow: Rosspen, 1998, 418-423; L.V. Danilova & V.P. Danilov, 'Krest'ianskaia mental'nost' i obshchina', In V.P. Danilov & L.V. Milov (eds), *Mentalitet i agrarnoe razvitie v Rossii (xix-xx vv.)*, Moscow: Rosspen, 1996, 22-39.

responsibilities reluctantly, and only because the law required him to do so, once elected. to be the leader of a village entailed being subject to constant cross-pressures from the community on the one hand and the authorities on the other. Decisions in the skhod were taken by consensus, and reflected the community's concept of pravda, which meant 'truth', that is everything that is true, just, morally right, in accordance with God's law or with accepted custom. Criminal charges and civil disputes were settled by a court of older and respected villagers, chaired by the starosta: their findings reflected pravda and the desire to settle matters in such a way that minimum damage was caused to the economic life of the community as a whole.¹³

Such a system was both egalitarian-democratic and yet also hierarchical-authoritarian. All households were represented, but by their heads, which meant older, male members of families. Women and younger men were disadvantaged and their interests were often not well defended, as was also the case within the household.¹⁴ The economic ideal was sufficiency. Both the indigent and the wealthy were regarded with suspicion: the indigent because they were a burden on the rest of the community, who would have to make up the shortfall created by their unpaid taxes, the wealthy because they were suspected of sharp practice, perhaps of criminal activity, which contravened pravda and

¹³ L.V. Danilova & V.P. Danilov, 'Krest'ianskaia mental'nost' i obshchina', in V.P. Danilov & L.V. Milov (eds), *Mentalitet i agrarnoe razvitie v Rossii (xix-xx vv)*, Moscow: Rosspen, 1996, 22-39; Peter Czap, 'Peasant class courts and peasant customary justice in Russia, 1861-1912', *Journal of Social History*, vol 1 (1967), 149-178; L.S. Prokof'eva, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina v Rossii vo vtoroi polovine xviii-pervoi polovine xix veka*, Leningrad: Nauka, 1981, chapter 4; Theodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class. Political sociology of peasantry in a developing society: Russia, 1910-1925*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 32-38.

¹⁴ C.A. Frierson, 'Razdel: the peasant family divided', *Russian Review*, vol 46 (1987), 35-51; Christine D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia: family and community in the post-emancipation period*, Princeton University Press, 1991, especially chapter 6.

might be a threat to their colleagues. As a popular saying had it, 'Wealth is a sin before God, and poverty is a sin before one's fellow villagers'.¹⁵

In the attempt to ensure that each household had enough for subsistence and the discharge of its obligations, it was accepted that households should help each other out of difficulties, whether shortage of food, sickness of a working member or inability to cope with the demands of the harvest. Bread would be put aside for a starving family, herbs or other medical help would be provided for the sick, neighbours would rally round and lend a hand with the reaping. Such mutual aid, known as *pomochi*, was not altruism, but self-interest in conditions of joint responsibility.¹⁶ This mutual self-interest had its dark sides too: villagers kept a close watch on each other's lives and constantly exchanged information about them. Heavy drinking, stealing or marital discord could wreck the economic life of a household and thus affect all their lives. Besides, it discouraged enterprise or leadership of any kind, in economic or political matters.

The outside world left the village largely alone, but from time to time would demand from it taxes or recruits. These were matters which the *starosta* would arrange with the landowner, in the days of serfdom, later with the local policeman, tax collector or recruiting officer. Internally, taxes and military service duties were apportioned according to the decision of the *skhod*.¹⁷

Overall, we may say that the shape of the village commune was determined both from within and from without, by the needs of its own members and by the demands of the state. It both guaranteed subsistence to its households and provided the state with the means to

¹⁵ B.N. Mironov, *Sotsial'naia istoriia Rossiia perioda imperii*, St Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999, vol 1, 330.

¹⁶ M.M. Gromyko, *Traditsionnye normy povedeniia i formy obshcheniia russkikh krest'ian xix veka*, Moscow: Nauka, 1986, 38-70.

defend and administer the empire. However, it also made reform in the interests of economic development very difficult. When Prime Minister Petr Stolypin tried to establish private ownership of peasant land after 1906, in order to encourage a more entrepreneurial mode of agriculture, he found communal institutions very tenacious. His reform had relatively little effect in the heartlands of rural Russia where it was most needed.¹⁸

The Soviet Enterprise

The internal workings of the Soviet enterprise, perhaps surprisingly, present certain analogies with those of the village commune. Officially, all Soviet enterprises were part of the planned economy, and their output was determined by Gosplan, the state planning commission, on the basis of their capacities and of the needs of the economy as a whole. Gosplan gave the orders, and the factory turned out the goods required: that was the principle.

In practice, it pretty soon became clear during the 1930s, the first decade of the planned economy, that high output could not be achieved simply by command from above. The problem was caused in part by the influx of immigrants from the countryside, unskilled and unaccustomed to factory discipline, and by the pressures of introducing new industrial processes rapidly and with insufficient preparation. But there was more to it than that: there was an inherent tension between 'Bolshevik willpower', technical rationality and the cautious collectivist traditions inherited from the peasant world to which the workers had recently belonged. Orders

¹⁷ V.A. Aleksandrov, *Sel'skaia obshchina v Rossii (xviii-nachalo xix veka)*, Moscow: Nauka, 1976.

¹⁸ W.E. Mosse, 'Stolypin's villages,' *Slavonic & East European Review*, vol 43 (1964-5), 257-274; Judith Pallot, 'Open fields and individual farms: land reform in pre-revolutionary Russia,' *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, vol 75 (1984), 46-60; and her 'Did the Stolypin land reform destroy the peasant commune?' in R.B.

from above, whether motivated by ideological zeal or the demands of technology, had to be filtered through the peasant tradition of mutual consultation and decision-making. Formerly practised in the village commune, this tradition was now perpetuated in the *artel*, a workingmen's cooperative whose members often, though not invariably, originated from the same rural region. The *artel* concluded agreements with employers, often supplied some of its own tools, arranged its own work-patterns and divided up the pay among its members according to its own criteria. In one case this was reportedly according to the length of its members' beards – perhaps an approximate way of gauging seniority! The *artel* was especially common as a labour unit in the timber and construction industries, but might be encountered almost anywhere. Enterprise managers disliked it, since it deprived them of much of their control over the labour process, and they felt it encouraged inefficient work practices, but they often had to tolerate it reluctantly in order to find competent hands at all.¹⁹

Instead of working to harness the *artel* and use it for their own purposes, enterprise managers in the end decided to abolish it in order to encourage mechanisation and impose individual pay and assessment systems.²⁰ For that purpose they set up 'brigades', each under an appointed, not elected, brigade leader. Even then, however, managers still found that in practice they had to concede workers a great deal of control over the labour process, as though the *artel* had returned by the back door to determine matters such as the speed and organisation of work

McKean (ed), *New Perspectives in Modern Russian History*, London: Macmillan, 1992, 117-132.

¹⁹ David Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: social identities in Moscow, 1929-1941*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, especially 86-91, 109-112; Hiroaki Kuromiya, 'Workers' *artels* and Soviet production relations,' in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, Richard Stites (eds), *Russia in the Era of NEP: explorations in Soviet society and culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 72-88.

²⁰ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as civilisation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 89.

and the quality of the finished product. Workers were scarce, and to retain them and secure at least their minimal cooperation, managers had to allow them a certain day-to-day autonomy, and also to turn a blind eye to lateness, drinking, periods of slack work and insubordination.²¹ At the same time, given the ubiquitous shortages, workers depended on enterprise managers for many material benefits otherwise difficult to obtain, so they too had an interest in putting in enough serious work to fulfil the plan. This mutual 'co-dependency'²² reproduced roughly the situation of the village commune, except that the link to the state was now much more direct and the element of state-supported patronage much greater. Mutual supervision of the workforce was also much tighter, backed up by the party cell, the Cadres Department and the NKVD/KGB.

Since there was no market economy making its demands on the productive system, the outcome of the encounter between these conflicting forces was a compromise between the demands of Gosplan, of the enterprise managers and of the workers. The Soviet enterprise became an institution dedicated to fulfilling the needs of these three major participants. Gosplan required fulfilment of the numerical indicators of the plan. The managers and workers required a plan that was not too demanding; the job of the managers was to secure it by negotiating with Gosplan, and then to create the framework within which the workers could formally fulfil it. In the absence of market disciplines, how they did this and the quality of the product turned out at the end was nobody's concern. The Soviet enterprise became ever poorer at generating the output which was its ostensible function and became instead an institution whose main aim was to satisfy the life needs of those who worked in it. Through it the workers received pay, housing, medical care, recreation,

²¹ Kuromiya, 'Workers' artels', 78-82; Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialisation: the formation of modern Soviet production relations, 1928-1941*, London: Pluto Press, 1986, chapter 6 and pp 256-7.

²² Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 223-5.

social security, often staple food supplies, in fact the elementary requirements of life in a society of scarcity. The managers received those things too, and also status, security and the habit of command.

Managers and workers were dependent on each other for the continuation of this benign situation. An over-demanding manager was a threat to the workers' comfortable arrangements and would be met by strategies of resistance which in the end threatened to jeopardise his benefits. On the other hand, hopelessly lazy, drunken or incompetent workers would not fulfil the plan, and so would get him into serious trouble.²³ The whole situation reminds one of the communal village arrangements, which ensured subsistence by cooperation, ostensible deference to authority and agreed traditional work practices. Innovative technology, bringing with it new work practices, were a threat to these arrangements.

The result was an economy which produced a basic minimum to ensure a tolerable existence for those within the system, but which was hard on outsiders and insensitive to the needs of consumers or the demands of new technology. Soviet society was intended to be an egalitarian society based on abundance; it actually became a hierarchical society based on scarcity. The texture of the society can be found in the hierarchical personal relationships necessary to get round the scarcity. Enterprise managers employed *tolkachi*, 'pushers', to secure urgently needed materials, spare parts, etc, in short supply: their job was to cultivate good personal relationships with potential suppliers.²⁴ In everyday life ordinary people constantly came up against shortages or low-quality goods generated by the productive system I have described. They would overcome the problems thus created by seeking alternative

²³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times – Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 49, 56-7.

²⁴ J.S. Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957.

sources of supply either by using influence with superiors, or through personal relationships based on the mutual exchange of favours.²⁵ In either case, Soviet institutions had a certain *trompe l'oeil* quality: patron-client relationships or mutual personal networks offered the high road to survival. Those who were outside them were seriously disadvantaged; they did not however form quite an underclass, since minimal social security benefits were available for all. To that extent, the Soviet institutionalisation of social need.²⁶ Union had succeeded in advancing a little way along the road to the

The reason the Gorbachev and Yeltsin economic reforms were unpopular was that they brought in the market and thereby disrupted these informal arrangements without, for most people, putting anything effective in their place. During the Yeltsin years commentators often remarked in a puzzled way that, though factories were not paying their workers or were paying them very late in inflated rubles, the workers were not quitting, and hence unemployment was low. This paradox is explained by the mutual dependency elucidated above: workers still depended on the enterprise for some of the material benefits of life, and so clung to even the shadow of employment as long as they could. Their employers, for their part, endeavoured to meet their side of the bargain by continuing to demand state subsidies or by piling up debt, a major cause of the economic crisis of 1998.

²⁵ Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: blat, networking and informal exchange*, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, chapter 2.

²⁶ Mervyn Matthews, *Poverty in the Soviet Union: the life-styles of the under-privileged in recent years*, Cambridge University Press, 1986; see especially p 178.

The Communal Apartment

It was not the original intention of the Soviet regime that people should live in communal apartments. They had planned to set up *doma-kommuny*, where many family functions, such as cooking, laundry and child-care, would be organised collectively, in order to relieve women of household chores and leave family members maximum freedom to lead their own lives together or apart, as they wished.²⁷

However, the regime never invested enough in the building and rebuilding required to establish such collectives. In any case by the 1930s the official ideology had shifted back to regarding the family as the core unit of society, and such dwelling construction as proceeded in those years was of family flats. They were awarded to senior officials of party and state, to Stakhanovite workers and other specially favoured groups. Ordinary people had to crowd into the existing largely pre-revolutionary stock of dwelling-space. Given the huge immigration into the towns during the 1930s, that would have created problems in any circumstances, but especially since the construction of homes for dwelling was not a priority of the first five-year plans. In most countries the result would have been shanty towns on the urban peripheries. Owing to the Soviet regime's egalitarian principles, however, together with its desire to administer and control social processes, shanty towns were unacceptable. Instead, already from 1918 local soviets were decreeing *uplotnenie*, or 'crowding together', under which the former occupants of spacious bourgeois apartments were deprived of their ownership rights and gradually ceded space to newcomers, finishing up typically in just one room of their old property, while the other rooms were occupied each by a family.²⁸

²⁷ E.Iu. Gerasimova. 'Sovetskaia kommunal'naia kvartira', *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal*, 1998, nos 1-2, 224-242.

²⁸ E.Iu. Gerasimova, 'Sovetskaia kommunal'naia kvartira'.

In some ways the communal apartment resembled the village commune. Since the former bourgeois members had been deprived of their wealth, everyone shared a kind of egalitarian poverty, and marked departures from the average were regarded with suspicion: the very poor because they were a burden to their neighbours, the affluent because their wealth suggested criminal behaviour which could be a danger to others. On the other hand, alongside the egalitarian features there was also a hierarchy among the apartment dwellers. At the top was the kvartupolnomochennyi, the appointed apartment supervisor, and also those who had good connections with the domovoi komitet, the house committee which managed the whole apartment block, with the local soviet or party committee, and/or with the police. Also near the top were those who had lived there longest, and therefore had the most detailed knowledge of the informal arrangements, as well as the greatest commitment to the collective.

Members of the apartment had to co-exist somehow, and to devise rules about how this could be done, in ways as far as possible acceptable to everyone. There was a need for mutual consensus and decision-making, which required regular consultation, even if there was no mechanism which resembled the skhod. Some rules, for example about the use of bathroom or telephone, or about paying for gas and electricity, were written and displayed in a prominent position. Most rules, though, were informal, were mediated through kitchen gossip and perhaps tested out through the occasional skandal – a row, scene or shouting match conducted in public – in which the winner's version would be accepted as more authoritative for the future.²⁹

As in the village, the fortunes of families and individuals would fluctuate. Since they were all near the subsistence frontier, it was helpful if they could tide each other over bad times. To some extent this was

normal practice: keeping an eye on each other's children, using a neighbour's saucepan, sieve, matches or salt, though all these instances of aid needed to be regulated by mutual agreement and/or convention. Lending money was more problematic, but also generally expected where there were good relations. Besides, refusal to lend money might lead to theft, which always disturbed good relations and generated tension. Once a loan was made, the debtor would usually do his utmost to return the money on time, to keep up the relationship, even if he had shamefacedly to request another loan the next morning.³⁰

To a far greater extent than the village commune, the communal apartment was linked to an authority system which supervised the behaviour of its members. The close proximity in which people lived ensured that major family events were known by everyone. Even ordinary conversations might well be overheard if they took place in the kitchen – the venue for general sociability – or even in a family room with thin walls. Normally one or more members, perhaps the upolnomochennyi and one other, would be reporting regularly to the security police, and anyone could easily do so if they choose, merely by writing an anonymous denunciation. They might well do this in the hope of gaining extra living space or other forms of privilege. The boundaries of the private were even more porous than in the village, since private functions like washing were conducted in public rooms, and there was no buffer zone between family rooms and public ones. This situation caused great privation and distress to urbanised professional people and intellectuals, who needed privacy for their work, and for everyone it meant that, as one respondent put it, 'I had to take my trousers off in front of my mother-in-law'. It may be that the lack of privacy contributed to the

²⁹ Il'ia Utekhin, *Ocherki kommunal'nogo byta*, Moscow: OGI, 2001, 95-100.

³⁰ Utekhin, *Ocherki*, 129.

relative frequency of paranoid mental disorders in the USSR.³¹ As émigré Russian scholar, Svetlana Boym (who spent her childhood in a communal apartment), has commented, 'Every communal apartment dweller is probably scarred for life by.... symbolic "joint responsibility", a double bind of love and hatred, of envy and attachment, of secrecy and exhibitionism, of embarrassment and compromise'.³²

The greatest difference from the village commune, however, was the varied social background of the members. Usually a core of long-time urban dwellers, some of them bourgeois in origin and relatively well-educated, would find themselves sharing space with recent immigrants from the countryside. Their domestic habits, as well as their underlying views of life, were so different that collective norms were far harder to establish and maintain than in the village. (This was the great difference too from the shanty-town mode of urbanisation.) Long-time urbanites had expectations of privacy, hygiene and courtesy which were not shared by the country cousins with whom they now had to live in close proximity. These discrepancies generated constant tension and conflict over dirt in the bathroom and toilet, over permissible behaviour for visitors, over noise in the early morning and/or late evening, over the disappearance of food and items of personal property.³³

In keeping with the more varied and casual nature of urban life, visitors or temporary dwellers were far more of a problem in the communal apartment than in the village. They were a problem because they were unfamiliar with the complex and changing system of norms and rules, and because inevitably they lacked the commitment to them. They

³¹ Utekhin, *Ocherki*, 131-140.

³² Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: mythologies of everyday life in Russia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 123-4.

³³ E.Iu. Gerasimova, *Sovetskaia kommunal'naia kvartira kak sotsial'nyi institut* (avtoreferat kandidatskoi dissertatsii), St Petersburg, 2000.

resembled more the inmates of an obshchezhitie, or hostel, a quite different social unit with a very different set of norms.³⁴

From the late 1950s onwards, as the regime undertook a huge programme of domestic housing construction, many people left communal apartments to settle in private flats. Usually they did so with great relief; some, however, reported that they felt uneasy in their new surroundings because of the lack of company and the feeling that there was no one to fall back on in difficulties.³⁵

The communal apartment has been a major formative influence on the life of the post-Soviet towns. Urban life is still partly rural in texture. To the present day Russian intellectuals, at least of the older generation, cultivate a tradition of informal hospitality and sociability, usually in the kitchen, which is a remnant of it. Manners are simple, and some might regard them as boorish, reflecting decades of living alongside imperfectly urbanised villagers. Ordinary Russians usually live now in separate family apartments, but still gather whenever they can, which is to say from early spring to late autumn, in courtyards and squares to sit on benches or improvised seats. The men play dominoes or cards, the women gossip, and the children play nearby in sandpits and on swings.

If the Soviet project was a modernising one, then the communal apartments certainly obstructed it, by perpetuating rural patterns of social interaction, even in the largest cities – indeed, especially there, for that is where the pressure on dwelling space was greatest. Urbanisation was, then, largely conducted by the ‘ruralisation’ of the towns.³⁶

Today, however, the younger generation, which has known nothing of communal apartments, is moving away from such customs. Especially in the newer very high apartment blocks, it is not uncommon for tenants

³⁴ Utekhin, *Ocherki*, chapter 7.

³⁵ Utekhin, *Ocherki*, 122n.

³⁶ Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: essays in the social history of interwar Russia*, London: Methuen, 1985, 303-4.

not even to know who their neighbours are, and not to greet them on landings and in lifts. With the passing of the Soviet state, apartment dwellers are no longer common victims of an oppressive system. On the contrary, they are individuals seizing their opportunities in the opposite kind of social environment, one seemingly without collective norms of any kind. With the far greater disparities in wealth which have arisen in the past decade, people are much more secretive about their affairs and their life style. Those who are affluent conceal the fact, in order not to attract theft, begging or just unwelcome attention. One reason for growing poverty and poor health is that the networks of mutual help and support which used to keep people going in difficult times are breaking down.³⁷

Conclusions

Russians are used to communities of egalitarian poverty, which have grown up from below, but are exploited by the authorities for reasons of state. Informal in procedures, they are guided by tradition, consensus and personal influence rather than law, they take decisions in common and they deal with the outside world through one authoritative elected representative. They are used to providing for their own needs, either personally or through networks of colleagues who are in the same situation. During the Soviet period, such communities became more penetrable to the authorities and also developed a greater dependency on authority figures to provide some of their material needs, in return for the fulfilment of certain work requirements. At the same time, they functioned in such a way as to obstruct and eventually completely frustrate the Soviet modernisation project.

³⁷ Alena Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: blat, networking and informal exchange*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, last chapter.

However, their breakdown has also had damaging effects. Since Russians have been used to conducting their personal lives and fulfilling many of their social needs within such communities, their dissolution today under the pressure of unrestrained and weakly institutionalised market forces is highly stressful. Russia is entering modernity in a particularly abrupt and painful manner.