

# THE SOVIET UNION—A GEOGRAPHER'S RE-APPRAISAL\*

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Until 1956 there was not much opportunity in the postwar period for Americans to visit the Soviet Union because of Soviet restrictions on visits. But since 1956 a change of policy has resulted in the encouragement of foreign travel to selected areas of the Soviet Union. The result has been an annual wave of visitors, including thousands of Americans (10,000 in 1959 and 15,000 in 1960) who flocked to see "what the Soviet Union is really like!" This easing of barriers has made it possible also for a number of American geographers to visit the Soviet Union and thus gain first-hand knowledge of the Soviet way of life. It was my privilege in the summer of 1959 to visit the Soviet Union for a period of three months. During that time *Intourist*, the Soviet official tourist agency, was most cooperative in arranging tours to various regions and visits to geographical departments of universities and to geographical institutes of the Soviet Academy of Science.

During a series of tours I visited the cities of Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, Riga, Lvov, Uzhgorod, Chernovtsy, Odessa, Kharkov, Stalingrad, Rostov on Don, Sochi on the Black Sea, Tashkent and Samarkand in Central Asia, and Irkutsk in Siberia. Travel was by plane, train, car, bus, and special tours were made by boat through the Volga-Don Canal and on Lake Baikal.

These visits to a variety of regions with the attendant advantages of talking with varied peoples gave an opportunity for a personal evaluation of conditions in the Soviet Union—an opportunity to evaluate items which have not usually been treated in geographical literature but which are vital as background knowledge to study of the Soviet Union.

## THE PLACE OF GEOGRAPHY

A special opportunity presented was the possibility of visiting geographical institutions and of meeting Soviet geographers. In the Soviet Union, geography has a dual role not only as a scholastic subject in universities and other schools but also as a practical instrument of regional economic planning. As most of the vast area of the Soviet Union is in a primary stage of both exploration and development, geography supplies a most useful framework for both exploration and planning.

As a result geography and geographers appear in a variety of institutions. Geography is taught in elementary and middle schools<sup>1</sup> and subsequently in both the pedagogical schools for teacher training and in the universities. In the United States, the general field of geography is usually divided into

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed analysis see Chauncy D. Harris, "The Teaching of Geography in the Soviet Union," in James, Preston E., ed., *New Viewpoints in Geography*, 1959, pp. 248-257.

physical and cultural geography. But in the Soviet Union, the division is into physical and economic geography in conformity with the doctrines of Communism, although the category of economic geography is not limited solely to the economic sphere but includes essentially the whole spectrum of human activity.

Geography is well represented in the universities of all the republics, but Moscow State University has the largest staff of all—over 450 staff members, headed by Professor Iu. G. Saushkin. In addition to Moscow State University, I visited the Universities of Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, Lvov, and Chernovtsy and was most cordially received by the members of the geography departments who were desirous of establishing contact with American geographical publications and with American geographers.

Geography in the Soviet Union is also well represented in the Soviet Academy of Science which carries on a large-scale program of research. The Institute of Geography of the Soviet Academy of Science, whose director is Academician I. P. Gerasimov, has its main offices in Moscow but has subsidiary groups throughout the country. In some cases, faculty members of universities or pedagogical institutions may simultaneously be members of the Institute of Geography of the Academy of Sciences.<sup>2</sup> It was my pleasure to be invited to speak to the Geographical Institute of the Academy of Science in Moscow.

An important role in Soviet geography is also played by the Geographical Society of the USSR, organized in 1845. In 1959 the Society had a membership of nearly 10,000 persons. Although the headquarters of the Society are in Leningrad, there are 25 additional "branches" and 48 sections in the rest of the Soviet Union. The Society has a variety of publications and sponsors both national and sectional meetings where professional papers are presented and discussed. It was my pleasure to visit the Society's headquarters in Leningrad and to meet the Secretary of the Society, Ye. Ye. Voronov.<sup>3</sup>

These geographical institutions have functions similar to those in the United States. But there is one very important difference in the status of geography in terms of the practical use of geography by the state and governmental agencies in the Soviet Union in economic and administrative planning. The importance of this to Soviet geography is aptly illustrated by quoting the remarks of the editor of the *Bulletin of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Geographical Series*, (*Izvestiya Akademii Nauk SSSR, Seriya Geograficheskaya*), in an article entitled "The Development of Productive Forces under the Seven-Year Plan:"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For further details see two articles by D. V. Kravchenko: "The Work of the Institute of Geography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1957," *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation*, Jan.-Feb., 1960, pp. 16-21, and "The Work of the Institute of Geography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1958," *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation*, March, 1960, pp. 3-9.

<sup>3</sup> For a report of the Society see "The Third Congress of the Geographical Society of the USSR," *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation*, May, 1960, pp. 48-76.

<sup>4</sup> See translation in *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation*, April 1960, pp. 30-31. Additional articles on the planning of economic administration regions by I. V. Komar, P. M. Alampiyev, and V. V. Kistanov are included in the same issue.

The program of Communist construction adopted by the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has confronted Soviet Science with great and responsible tasks. Among these are the development and correct geographic distribution of productive forces, in which Soviet geographers can and should take an active part. For that purpose the editors of this journal, in presenting current problems of the development of productive forces under the seven-year plan, consider it necessary to direct special attention to a thorough discussion of their proper geographic distribution.

Among the problems of distribution of productive forces, questions of economic regionalization are of special interest to geographers. The control figures for the development of the USSR national economy in 1959-1965, confirmed by the 21st party congress, stress the importance of economic regionalization for the proper distribution of productive forces of the country: "Establishment of major economic-geographic regions in planning promotes the proper distribution and most economical territorial organization of the national economy of the Soviet Union." The significance of establishing major economic-geographic regions is increasing because of the commencement of work on long-term plans of development of the Soviet economy for longer periods.

The combination of large size of the Soviet Union, the paucity of detailed information of much of the area, and the use of geographers in economic planning produces a need for a considerable number of geographers in addition to the need for geography teachers. This accounts for the large number of undergraduate geography majors trained in the Soviet Union. In Moscow State University in 1959, for example, there were 1,800 majors taking the five-year course in geography. It should be noted, however, that the number of graduate students does not correspond to the undergraduate totals, for Moscow State University had only 60 graduate students.

#### SOVIET STATISTICS

At the same time that the change of policy concerning visitors was taking place, there was also a significant alteration in the official Soviet attitude concerning publication of economic, demographic, and other statistics. From the middle thirties, the government had stopped issuing detailed statistics and instead had resorted to the practice of quoting percentage changes rather than specific figures of either quantity or value. The result was a virtual impossibility of obtaining accurate knowledge of many facets of the Soviet economy and of population changes and migrations.

Thus until 1956 only vague estimates were given of even the total population of the Soviet Union, much less a regional breakdown or tables listing urban inhabitants or city populations. But in 1956 the former practice of publishing a statistical yearbook was revived. Since that time the previous famine has almost changed to a feast in terms of a flood of Soviet statistics, although the increased quantity is not matched in terms of greater accuracy or completeness of statistics. In truth, a word of caution must be expressed not only because of inconsistencies and incompleteness, but also because in some cases recent Soviet statistics have been computed on an entirely different basis than in former years. For that reason the user must be quite careful in attempting to explain drastic

changes in specific types of economic production. For example, the previous method of estimating wheat production was to use a "field" estimate, whereas American estimates are normally calculated in terms of "barn yield." Hence Soviet estimates were inflated because there is a substantial loss between field and barn. But now Soviet grain estimates are reported to be "barn estimates," which will cause a seeming drop in the total compared to previous years.

#### POPULATION MIGRATION

A major change in the demographic situation was precipitated by a new census of the entire Soviet Union on January 15, 1959. From time to time preliminary census statistics have been released in newspapers and other publications. A total population of 208,800,000 was reported, a figure somewhat higher than estimated in 1956. Preliminary figures give some indication of population movements and settlement of new areas. It was announced that while the population of the Soviet Union as a whole increased 9.5 per cent, between 1939 and 1959, the population of the Urals increased 32 per cent, Western Siberia 24 per cent, Eastern Siberia 34 per cent, the Far East 70 per cent, and Central Asia and Kazakhstan 38 per cent.<sup>5</sup>

These percentage figures are misleading in terms of actual numbers involved. The Far East has the greatest percentage increase because it started with the least; hence, even a small number shows a greater change. Actually the population of the Urals rose by some 4 million, Siberia also by 4 million, the Far East by 2 million, Kazakhstan by 3 million, Central Asia by 9 million, and Transcaucasia by more than 1.5 million.<sup>6</sup>

The new statistics show the major trend that, while the population of the area west of the Urals remained at about the same total of approximately 135 million, the population of the eastern area (including the Transcaucasus) rose from 55 to 73 million. This increase of 18 million in the east roughly equals the increase of population in the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1959 and gives statistical evidence of the movement of people eastward and southward. There is also evidence that White Russia and Lithuania both lost population in the intervening period.<sup>7</sup>

This raises the question as to what areas of the Soviet Union are being developed and to what extent. From the publicity given to the movement eastward it would seem that economic development is greatest in the area east of the Urals. But in the light of my own travels it is my impression that the greatest economic development is still in the area west of the Urals with the Middle Volga as the present area of greatest growth. Leningrad and Moscow are nuclei of expanding economic production as reflected in the rapid growth of population. These are old centers where the new in-

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<sup>5</sup> *Pravada*, May 10, 1960, P. 1 (Translated in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol. XI, No. 19, p. 3).

<sup>6</sup> A. Konstantinov, "Some Conclusions about the Geography of Cities and the Urban Population of the USSR Based on the Results of the 1959 Census," *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1960, pp. 59-75.

<sup>7</sup> In an effort to make such statistics quickly available a statistical abstract of the Soviet Population census has been compiled: Huey Louis Kostanick, ed. *Soviet Preliminary Population Statistics*, Russian and East European Studies Center Series, Vol. 1, No. 1, December, 1960, 39 pp.

dustry represents simply a constant growth. But, in contrast, the city of Minsk in the republic of White Russia has achieved a new economic position as a producer of trucks, tractors, motorcycles, and radios and other electrical equipment. The Ukraine is another area of planned growth. Kiev, the Donbas, and Kharkov all show new plant construction and other signs of urban growth. Odessa, too, showed visible signs of prosperity.

I was also quite impressed with the obvious growth of Soviet Central Asia. The lure of the desert under irrigation is an attraction which a Californian can easily understand, especially if he, too, has succumbed to that lure and moved from the eastern United States to the southwest. Yet development in central Asia, centered in the area of Tashkent and in the "Hungry Steppe" to the east, is significant more at present in terms of agriculture than in industry because Central Asia has most suitable conditions to become the "California" of the Soviet Union as fruit and vegetable supplier for the population centers of Kiev, Moscow, and Leningrad, all of which could readily absorb more such produce were it easily available. Central Asia could undoubtedly play an even more active role now if transportation were available to carry more produce. This "bottleneck" of transport difficulties is basic in most areas of the Soviet Union and represents the result of too great a concentration on the railroads as the transportation medium for some 84 per cent of all Soviet traffic. Hence, in my opinion, greater development of Soviet Central Asia is linked directly to the need for improved communication. But there is no doubt that Central Asia is becoming the "South" of the Soviet Union as the major cotton producing area even though the climatic conditions are far different from those of our "South."

Another area of undoubted development is southwest Siberia stretching from the Urals to Kuznetsk. Although I landed at Omsk and at Novosibirsk, travel was restricted to the airport administration center during the short stopover of the regular schedule of flights between Moscow and my destination, Irkutsk. This is the stretch of Siberia that has the best conditions for population growth; the planned network of hydroelectric stations between Kuznetsk-Stalink, Irkutsk, and Bratsk is indicative of the Soviet desire to populate and develop this corner of southwestern Siberia.

Although I was not permitted to visit the Far East, it was my impression that relatively minor development has taken place and that this situation is not likely to change soon.

#### HOUSING—THE MOST PRESSING PROBLEM

If transportation is a major problem in terms of national need, housing is certainly the most pressing problem in terms of the need of the individual Soviet citizen. Again and again people told me of the need for more living space. Families are often crowded in two-room or even one-room apartments, frequently sharing kitchens and bathrooms.

Although many Russians claim this situation was created in part by the destruction of so many homes during World War II, the lack of housing is also due in greater part to the official governmental policy of focusing on capital development and minimizing consumer goods, such as housing. But, since 1957, there has been an increased emphasis on housing construc-

tion so that the sight of huge construction cranes looming over newly-built brick walls is a familiar sight in all of the cities.

Such construction is often in the form of planned developments in the suburbs of all cities. The most famous of these is the "Southwestern Quarter" ("Yugo-zapadni Rayon") of Moscow, located between the airport and the city so that the first real view of Moscow is the magnificent apartment development that certainly creates a most favorable first impression of Russia on the foreign visitor. Yet even in this most modern housing development in the entire Soviet Union, most of the apartments have only two rooms and would be considered small by European standards, much less by American standards. Yet for the Muscovite these represent a modern concept of living to which one becomes quickly—and, one might add, almost irretrievably—accustomed.

The most familiar sight in the cities I visited was new buildings under construction. But I believe that the statement should also be made that construction is greatest in the largest towns and is minimal in villages. This points up two factors that may be involved, first, the seeming focus of Soviet concentration on urban development, and, second, the allied feature of the tremendous population migration from the village to the towns, a feature which appears to be a world-wide one and not limited to any single country.

#### THE SOVIET CITY

During the past four decades of Communist control not only have cities grown in size, but a "Soviet imprint" has been placed on them as well. Although basically the Soviet city does not differ from the ordinary European city in terms of function, it does differ in terms of the cultural overprint, because there is a definite Soviet "stamp" that appeared in all the cities that I visited.

One of the characteristic features of all cities is the homage paid to Lenin, Stalin, and Krushchev, followed in turn by local heroes of the Communist world. Statues, posters, portraits, busts, and slogans are augmented by "living" mosaics of live flowering plants whose color and shape are used as the media of portrayal of the Communist heroes. Another Soviet symbol is the ubiquitous "red star," that may be enshrined on the ground or on top of the spires of the tallest buildings. For example, at night the skyline of Moscow is highlighted by the revolving red stars that top the Kremlin and many of the taller buildings.

A second series of posters and displays are associated with the "five-year plans" (now the "seven-year plan") of industrial development. Huge diagrammatic maps show the major industrial developments, such as hydroelectric plants and iron and steel plants, over the Soviet Union. Other displays show plans for the local republic and, finally, for the local city or region. In some cases these displays are quite spectacular, and there may even be screens on them for night showing of movies of progress made on various projects.

Another series of items are linked with "World War II," which is called the "Great Anti-Fascist War." Not only are there statues of soldiers, sailors, and aviators but also many stone and other memorials to com-

as at Stalingrad, the actual "bombed out" structures have been preserved memorate those fallen in the war as well as specific heroes. In some cases, to commemorate the destruction that took place. In the areas that underwent actual war, there is usually a "Museum of the Anti-Fascist War."

Every town also has its "Park of Rest and Culture," a shady, tree-lined park which was often constructed in part by the youth of the area. And the youth were often employed to dig a "Komsomol" lake, named after the Komsomol, the leading youth organization. Similarly, each town has its Komsomol Club for the youth and a Pioneer Club for the younger children.

The same sort of political note is carried on in other forms. Higher schools, for example, are often named for Soviet heroes, as are major streets and factories as well. As might be expected, the names of Stalin and Lenin predominate.

The repetition of features and of names ultimately creates a "pattern" which, allied with the constant use of a style of architecture popularly called "Socialist architecture," creates the overprint of the Soviet city.

In Tashkent, for example, a Soviet city is arising in the middle of the old one and is clearly discernible even though the local style of architecture has fortunately been employed and is indeed a beautiful one. In Irkutsk, too, a Soviet center is arising in the midst of the old, exquisitely carved wooden buildings that typified the old Irkutsk of the Czarist era.

The tremendous growth of the cities is precipitating problems which in many cases are not susceptible of the same solution as in the United States. The question of population transportation and circulation is one such problem. In the United States, the automobile has served as a marvelous absorptive sponge to create surprising mobility (and, one must add, special problems of mass jams and parking difficulties especially when drivers prefer to travel alone), but in the Soviet Union, where as yet the automobile is not obtainable for the ordinary citizen, the solution has been mass public transportation. Therefore, cities have excellent networks of busses (powered by gasoline), trolley-busses (electrically-powered), street cars, and, in Moscow and Leningrad, the famous subways.

Thus the creation of the "Soviet city" carries with it new problems, problems which may have different solutions from the solutions of the United States and western Europe.

#### SUMMARY

This "appraisal" is a limited one in that it has been based primarily on observations made during a stay in the Soviet Union. These conclusions are:

1. Although there is a significant movement eastward and significant economic development of Central Asia and Siberia, the major development is still west of the Urals in the "old" regions which are undergoing new expansion.

2. A "Soviet city" is being created with urban patterns which can be differentiated from other world regions.

3. Geography holds a dual position in the Soviet Union both in the academic and in the planning fields. Soviet geographers are well trained

and have produced many works well worthy of study, although one must continually keep in mind that Soviet geography operates within the framework of Communism and that certain items must conform to national policy.

4. The availability of travel in the Soviet Union and the availability of new statistics will offer unusual opportunities for research and study in the field of Soviet Geography, a field which is indeed worthy of greater study and interest.