**Genocide, Suicide or Neglect: The death of Russia’s metropolitan poor**.

A speculative report prepared by the Soviet Academy for Theoretical Social Sciences: January 1991.

Background

This Report was instigated by the newly-appointed Director of the Academy and is to be regarded, at this stage, as an internal discussion document designed to provoke various lines of thought and argument so that a fuller understanding of any relevant issues may be reached.

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This is as far as I have got. The title won’t stay as that obviously. I wrote it just for devilment. I will delete it tomorrow and replace it with something more bureaucratic; something more acceptable. I like the title as it is but it won’t do for others. For me it neatly sets a thinking framework in my head at the very start. It gives me a way of interpreting things that I come across.

There can be no doubt that, in 1990-91, poor people are dying in large numbers on the streets of our two major cities. There can be no doubt that the majority of these are homeless, permanently or temporarily. The interesting intellectual puzzle is to work out whether what is happening counts as a deliberate attempt to wipe these people from society (Genocide), or whether they can be judged to be the collective agents of their own demise (Suicide), or whether they are simply overlooked and abandoned by the State and by the population at large (Neglect).

I will form my own conclusions but these will stay securely locked in my head. The final report will get as close to the puzzle as I can without stating it as such and certainly won’t set out my answer for anyone and everyone to see. So the title will need to be changed. It has maybe already been in existence for too long.

After the report’s short Background (Written, like all good things, as much to protect the writer as inform the reader) there will be a ‘Context’ section. In my view context is everything. The context continues shifting beneath my feet even as I get down to writing this report. Two years ago it would have been simpler. Two years ago everything was old-style Soviet. Now we are in transition; not fully one thing yet nowhere near clearly anything else. We are Status Unknown. People like me are left on unsure ground. We are out in open, dangerous territory. We are becoming intellectually displaced persons. We are in danger of being researchers without a home. That is why this Homelessness topic appealed to me so much.

One image that came to me on the trolleybus this morning was the cartoon character stranded above a chasm, one foot on each side as the two pull apart. You know that soon there will be a shot of him running in mid-air, feet pedalling against gravity. What you can never be sure of is what will happen after that. Sometimes the character falls, getting smaller and smaller, endlessly downwards into a tiny cloud of dust as he hits rock bottom. Sometimes the sheer force of all that air-pedalling inches the character closer and closer to the chasm edge so that he can pull himself onto solid ground and be off to have new adventures.

That is me at the moment: Appointed by an organisation with one foot firmly in the old ways of thinking but expected to step across onto the new basis of perestroika and glasnost. Now that those different expectations are pulling apart I am left looking down into the chasm. Maybe the report I have been asked to pull together will bridge the gap.

I have already gathered a wide range of information. Each evening it gets spread around the floor of my flat. During the day it gets hidden away although I am fairly certain that no-one will disturb it here. If anyone wants to know what data I have they will check my desk at the Academy. They will find files of official statistics. They will find copies of the Housing Code, bundles of legislative papers for Moscow and St Petersburg, and a small number of historical documents going back to the 1930s.

What isn’t at the Academy is this additional information. If I do get questioned about it I will say that it is information that has yet to be verified; that it is not-yet-approved; that it contains statistics that may be unreliable and certainly contains information that may well be doubtful. I will explain that until I have done the initial clarification any data counts as ‘informal’ and as such is best kept away from the Academy in case anyone might conclude that working with such unreliable information is part of the job of the Academy or that the Academy is somehow endorsing untested facts. Part of my role is to protect the integrity of the Academy and avoid contention and controversy. I can justify it that way.

Not that there is likely to be anything contentious or controversial in the Context section. Every report has a section about the context. This is the first main section, leading readers on through mainly familiar stuff. It sets out what is already known and does so in bland, neutral tones. The figures and words may turn out to be unreliable but they are the accepted figures and words. It is a repetition of history - and history, once decided upon, doesn’t change.

Let’s see: In my Context section what can I line up, word after word, statistic upon statistic, in a restatement of things as we know them?

Would it be safe, so early on in the report, as if it were acknowledged as fact, to say that the Soviet Union does not officially recognize homelessness but that it is increasingly becoming obvious that a problem does exist?

Safer maybe to stick to history as already documented. Stick to facts; stay away from opinion for now. Better to start with older things and to creep up on the present. Certainly there can be no initial way forward except through a setting out of the propiska system as established by Stalin in 1932.

I might explain that at the time (and everything has its purpose at the time even if structural changes later make those ideas open to revision) this was an instrument for the state to restrict mass immigration, caused by what we now recognise as expanding urban industrialisation and rural mass famine, to large cities. To live and work in the most strategic cities, citizens had to obtain a new 'domestic passport'. To obtain one of these a citizen needed a permanent address (the propiska) registered with the interior ministry. Certain criminals, political suspects, and undesirable people were denied a propiska and, unable to get the necessary domestic passport, had to leave the metropolitan centres for the peripheries of the state.

The propiska became (and to a large extent remains) the precondition for most civil rights and social benefits such as formal employment, access to medical insurance, education, unemployment benefits, ration cards, the right to vote and access to public libraries.

It will be valid, necessary even, to stress how the propiska is central to the allocation of state housing. Once a person is registered at an address, his or her right to this space remains secure. The only frequently recurring basis for eviction is prolonged absence. According to Article 60 of the Housing Code a tenant who is proved not to have resided at his or her place of living for more than six months may be deprived of the home and of the registration at that address. Losing registration means losing access to the rest of society. Losing a home means losing everything. Be absent from your home for too long and you officially cease to exist.

Long absences are often because of hospitalisation (usually of adults with mental illnesses) or criminals sentenced to more than six months. With the loss of their residence permit, such people automatically lose the right to housing, work and social services after their time in hospital or prison. If they had a home of their own before the conviction they are deprived of it. If they lived with their families it is up to the family to decide whether or not to re-register a released convict once the sentence was served. With little chance of independently regaining their residence permit, many such people have no choice but to live on the streets. Such a person is known as a *bomzh* (*Bez Opredelennogo Mesta Zhitelstva*, 'without fixed abode.’) This puts them at risk of being arrested and sentenced for vagrancy. Soviet law demands prison sentences of up to two years for vagrancy. This then becomes a vicious cycle almost impossible to break.

In the spirit of openness and honesty it has to be admitted that employment is not universal in present day society. People may feel that there are more work opportunities in the city and migrate there. They soon get caught, however, by the rule that housing and employment is a prerequisite for residency whilst residency is a prerequisite for housing and employment: 'no propiska, no job - no job, no propiska’.

At the same time, there are chronic shortages of qualified workers in some types of employment. Managers therefore often overlook the absence of a propiska or use the fact that a quota of guest workers can work on time-limited contracts with temporary propiski. These temporary workers exist in a state between homelessness and official residence. They are totally dependent on their jobs to be able to stay in temporary accommodation in that place. There is a bit of hope: A steady, reliable worker can be issued a permanent propiska from the workplace as a bonus. These flats or rooms then stay with the employee even if that person changes job.

In addition to workers being taken on without the required propiska, other groups of adults have found ways round the system. These include bogus marriages, students overstaying their time, or other illegal arrangements. Not all of these are poor or uneducated.. There are well-educated, articulate, formerly employed Russians living on the city streets because of financial misfortune, or because of personal problems. These are in low numbers but, together with those rendered homeless by the regime's propiska system, means that there has been a steady accumulation of 'hidden homeless’

This section of the report might end by hinting that things are not ideal and that changes need to be made – something like ‘It might be argued that a necessary repressive mechanism of the Soviet state established to prevent homelessness in cities has ended up creating more homelessness people’.

So that is the Context section fairly well sorted. Where does the report go next? How does it begin to address the issue that I have been asked to open up? I think the next section should be called ‘What is changing?’ Would that be a suitable line to take next?

The problem is going to be how best to describe the tentative changes that are acknowledged as being underway without appearing to necessarily promote such changes. Words will have to be carefully chosen, weighed, and assessed for varying potential interpretations. What a writer intends by a certain construction may not be how a reader sees it. There is a heavy duty on writers to phrase things well, to find just the right words, to incorporate a degree of flexibility (in which readers can think for themselves) without allowing ambiguities. It isn’t easy. In the past I have spent hours writing and rewriting some paragraphs in order to get them just right.

So, what c**a**n be said? There are set texts that can be drawn on. There are templates that can be used. There are formulations that have the feel of mantra about them. I don’t need to refer to them, they are in my head.

I might start with something along the lines that in order to revive the economy General Secretary Gorbachev began, in 1985, a process of increasing political liberalization in the communist state apparatus. That is common-speak. I am sure that I can suggest that this liberalisation led to nationalist movements and ethnic disputes emerging across the diverse republics within the USSR. In 1988 Estonia’s legislature passed laws resisting the control of the central government, and in 1990 Lithuania was the first of the Baltic states to declare restoration of their independence. Other states are indicating that they will follow this path which if recklessly pursued, will lead to the fragmentation of the Union. A referendum is due to be held soon. It is anticipated that the vast majority of Soviet citizens will vote to retain the Union.

The uncertainty of such developments is seen as holding the potential for a radical enough shift in context for old practices to need reviewing – hence the need for a report such as the one I am working on. The report is just one of a number of think-pieces to test out what might be the various scenarios for the near future and what these might mean for policy decisions.

So far so good. This is where the semi-solid ground starts to get swampy however. This is the part of the map where, in olden days, there would be margin drawings of fantastical animals and bold writings across largely empty tracts warning ‘Here Be Dragons’.

This is where I need my wits about me. Things can’t be done on automatic from here on. From here it is a cross between the blind man gently feeling for a good way forward and the brave explorer striding onwards to create new pathways that others might follow. This is where I have to suggest lines of thought. This is where I have to start to predict the future. This is where I stop sleeping soundly at nights. This is where I wake feverish and rush to rewrite certain sentences.

From this point I am no longer a simple scribe, a recorder of set texts with just a tiny amount of illumination here and there to make the mundane more interesting. This is where I am expected to act as seer, as fortune teller, as self-appointed Diviner to the State. This is where I am expected to be able to see the future in all its beauty and describe the certainties of how things will unfold. This is where I am not expected to get it wrong.

A degree of boldness is needed, then, to open that next section. I test a few possible phrases in my head and settle on: Homelessness is a social phenomenon and thus can take different forms depending on economic, political and legislative factors. These determine the ways in which a system produces homelessness, just as it constrains or facilitates options for actors (homeless or not) to affect their own situation.

The rest of the report will set out what need to be rational arguments concerning the near future possibilities for the production and solution of homelessness in the Soviet Union and in contemporary Russia. The speculations I put up for discussion should be visibly socially-based. There can be no hint of me in all of this. It has to be pure dialectical resolution of contradictions. Everything I write has to come across as questions for exploration; never as conclusions reached. Any hint of pushing my own views forward would be seen as giving undue status to me as the individual researcher/writer and insufficient emphasis on the collective social and economic necessities.

At the same time some speculation is required. The trends for me to speculate about are already there (within my hidden-in-my-brain Framework):

* transition to a market economy
* developing a housing market
* estimating the homeless population
* the propiska system
* criminality and homelessness
* penalties for vagrancy and begging
* employment and homelessness
* responsibility for supporting homeless adults
* views of urban residents
* views of homeless adults
* views of the State and its agencies

I still don’t take up my pen just yet. This is still not the time for writing. This is still a labour of the mind. I go down my mental list and turn each aspect over and around in my own head. When I have the words lined up in my head then I can start to write the report. Until then everything is conceptual.

I go through my own guesses for the future. Understandably there is a degree of uncertainty about how things will go across the Union but, for what they might be worth, I test out some thoughts as follows.

Will there be a market economy in the near future?

If trends continue (or are allowed to continue) on their present path there is a possibility of some form of break-up of the Soviet Union into a number of independent states. Russia will remain the most important of these. Other trends are indicating a possible shift towards a more market economy. Such a change in economic systems is likely to exacerbate certain Soviet-era social problems, if these have not been fully dealt with. Transition to a market economy is thus likely to make homelessness emerge as a social problem from its current ‘hidden’ position. Remove the current restraints and this mass of shadowy hidden homeless will emerge.

Effect of any future housing market

The existence of a housing market is likely to become a major cause of homelessness. The state will only keep a certain amount of housing as 'social flats' for the less privileged. Privatisation will allow owners to sell at a market price, but is also implies responsibility for a certain amount of maintenance costs. Given the poor state of most Russian apartment houses, privatisation will not be attractive to everybody and the process is likely to slow after an initial flurry. It is estimated that 50% will be privatised.

There are further links to be made between homelessness and privatisation. If housing is privatised it may not be regulated in line with current dwelling regulations. Overcrowding of families may increase, with relationship pressures pushing some family members out onto the streets.

Many Russians have a poor understanding of the legal technicalities of property deals. It would be easy to trick people out of their apartments. Vulnerable people will be especially open to exploitation. One popular belief is that so many potential home-owners are alcoholics who would be prepared to sell their flats for vodka-money, immediately making themselves homeless. A fear has been raised that professional swindlers might consciously target recently bereaved people in order to take advantage of their grief and loneliness. Once apartment fraud begins to get established it will become normal and unscrupulous relatives or spouses might easily begin using bribed officials to secure the right to the living space of others. Police estimate that gangs of criminals will move into using apartment fraud as a means of making money and that, overall, such apartment fraud might be the cause of a fifth of all homelessness. The implications are that the authorities will need resources to restrain such frauds.

Estimation of scale of homelessness

In most future scenarios a growth in the numbers of homeless adults is almost certain. It is difficult, however, to predict future numbers. There are some indicators. The average Russian homeless person is male, aged between 30 and 45 years, with rudimentary technical education. Typically, he is an ex-convict (60% likely), divorced, chronically sick, and with no legal means of earning money. Homeless adults are likely to include high numbers of mentally ill adults, those being released from residential care or those with learning problems on leaving school. Using statistics such as these it might be estimated that future levels of adult homeless in Moscow could rise to 50,000, although others put the figure as high as 300,000. The State will wish to respond to such levels of growth and the situation is therefore likely to improve after a short time. There are no exact statistics at the moment and there well may no reliable ways of counting homelessness in the future.

The propiska system

The key action that might be taken in future is the abolition of the propiska system. This could be done within two or three years. At the same time the major cities would argue exemption as ‘special cases’ and, as a minimum, will want to retain some form of city registration as a way of restricting urban flow of migrants to urban centres.

Criminality and homelessness

The most important change that social scientists need to work on in the near future is how to break the connection between criminality and homelessness. Depriving convicts of their places of residence is already illegal within Soviet law. In future there may be pressure for this to be implemented in practice so that the apartment of a convicted person is sealed until he or she is released. At the same time there are many people in prison who have already lost their homes under the existing system and who are awaiting a future release into homelessness. Some of these were sentenced for crimes of violence, but the majority are serving time (10-15 years in some cases) for petty thefts and vagrancy. There are strong arguments for repealing the current penalties for vagrancy and begging in order to reduce the numbers being sent to prison for extended periods.

By this stage of the report I will have shown that homelessness has many causes, takes different forms for different individuals, and therefore is likely to need a number of solutions putting in place.

Responsibilities

Homelessness is likely to be a growing problem which will need to be seriously addressed. At the moment no specific agency has responsibility for aiding the homeless. Future options will include city administrations, central government, humanitarian organizations, churches and so on. One might add charities to this list. Russian society generally distrusts charities. At the moment Russian law gives no status to private charities, so such organizations must fund themselves in helping an increasingly large number of urban poor. Support for charities will need to be considered.

Homegrown solutions will need to be developed if there is not to be an influx of Western aid agencies. One potential way forward is for churches to take on social roles to support homeless people. In Russia homeless people have always gathered near churches. Currently, however, the Orthodox Church appears more concerned with finances and pressing for the return of land.

Building on the meagre support that exists now there will be a need to increase the number of shelters to rehabilitate homeless people. Under current arrangements any shelters can only take very small numbers of homeless and these must be from the local area. The money to run and maintain these shelters is limited.

Charities and churches in Moscow might feasibly run several shelters. State agencies might support a similar number. Together this would be capable of housing almost 3000 people.

Facilities available at the shelter might include food, a place to wash, and access to medical or legal help. Teams of health staff could reach out to homeless on the streets instead of waiting for them to come to the shelters.

Residents of the shelters will probably need to stay there for a year if they are to get long-term help with their psychological and employment problems. There is, however, likely to be pressure for a more rapid turnover so that more individuals can be given low-level (but potentially ineffective?) assistance. If the economic changes mentioned above do come about then charities may find that a number of the people they are able to recruit to staff the shelters come from army backgrounds. This may put off many homeless who have bad experiences of dealing with prison authorities.

Views of state agencies

Supporting homeless adults is not currently on the state's social agenda. Many politicians argue that there are more pressing problems with a stronger claim on resources. Established state officials accuse the homeless of having created their own problems or of being beyond help.

The government will need a more coherent social policy than it has at the present moment. The report I am working on is a small step forward in working out what this might look like. Even if changes are brought about there will need to be sufficient money to meet the new arrangements, if we are not to end up with homeless who are no longer persecuted by the state, but are not being helped, either.

Some state personnel will need to take more sympathetic views of people who are homeless. This implies the need for appropriate retraining. The homeless take shelter where they can: in abandoned buildings, alleyways and sheds. They wander from place to place, earning money for food eg by collecting bottles, doing odd jobs, or begging. Many of the homeless, by necessity, rely on petty theft. Their main concern is to avoid the attention of the police who, at best, move them and, at worst, give them a heavy beating.

Views of urban residents and of the homeless themselves

Homeless adults receive almost no help and little sympathy from the general public, particularly following recent news reports suggesting that 70 percent of the homeless are infected with tuberculosis. Any increase in the numbers of homeless people will only increase existing tensions with urban residents who have little patience with what they see as the antisocial behavior and unacceptable lifestyle of the homeless. Society at large is not yet ready to accept the plight of the homeless. There will certainly be public education work to be done if this is to change.

 “Media exposure can be dangerous for the homeless, some of whom are beaten by well-off citizens venting their own fears.”

© Photo © Kursky Station. The Homeless Children

There is little understanding of what it is like to be homeless. Sometimes citizens have a romanticized view of a life with no responsibilities and lots of free time. The homeless themselves describe it differently: “You begin with rebellion against the society that discards you; then come the depression and self-loathing, then the self-deceiving belief that living in the streets is a free choice. At the final stage, you just give up”. I don’t know where I came across this quote but it is excellent and will need to be included.

So, there you have it: These are the things jumping around in my head at the moment. These are thoughts I will keep juggling until I am ready to let them fall onto the pages of my report. Such thinking might be being encouraged these days but not everywhere, not by everyone, not even fully throughout the Academy. So, for a little time longer, I will tread carefully. I will test each small step for safety. After all I have a wife and a child. I have, most of all, a home. I wouldn’t want to lose that. I wouldn’t want to be able to more accurately document the life of homeless people by joining their ranks. I want to keep that distance between them and me.

The new Director wants the report yesterday. He wants everything yesterday. There are some things, however, that need to be done in their own time.

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Genocide, Suicide or Neglect: The death of Russia’s metropolitan poor was written in relation to the following works in the Metropolis exhibition:

* Semyan Faibisovich ‘Sick on the Way?’ (2008)
* Semyan Faibisovich ‘Reposal’ (2008)
* Semyan Faibisovich ‘Take the Weight off Your Feet’ (2008)