

University Life In The Soviet Union

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Oleg Shmelof, a 27 year old engineer, defected from the Soviet Union on June 5, 1980 at Gander Airport while en route to an assignment in Cuba. He attended a technical university in Moscow from 1971 to 1977.

While at university a student has to work up to three months every year on a collective farm. In addition the student may spend many of his weekends doing compulsory free labour, part of his so-called

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socialist obligation, organized by the YCL. In the fall every year students are required to help with the harvest. In the Moscow region a student has to work for a month on a potato or wheat farm, while students in southern regions can spend up to three months working in cotton fields. Discipline is very strict at these work camps and refusal to work leads to an automatic dismissal. Weekend free labour while university is on often involves menial labour on a construction site. The work is usually trivial, unorganized and inefficient. It is designed more or less to waste time than to accomplish anything.

Students are paid for obligatory summer work. This work is called building detachment assignment and is organized by the YCL. Students are not allowed to work independently, but must work in groups whose organization is based on the YCL structure. Each group has its own political watch-dog who takes care of brainwashing activities, makes sure that

students donate to various funds such as the Vietnam and Chile funds, and who volunteers his group of workers for free Saturday labour. This summer work program is designed so that the state's control over student's minds and behavior is not slackened during the summer months. There is a great variety of building detachment jobs ranging from agricultural and construction work to jobs as vendors or porters on trains. The money a student earns for his two months of summer work varies from 100 to 1500 rubles. Another type of summer work is 'Communist' building detachment work done by unpaid volunteers who hope to put good marks on their record which will benefit them in their careers. A good record is of great importance to students of law, or foreign relations; in these disciplines the Communist party is only interested in students who have shown they are attached to the party/puppet strings.

Academic freedom is curtailed as much as personal freedom in Soviet universities.

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Once a student chooses his profession all his courses are prescribed; there is no choice of courses or professors. Every student must take courses in the history of the Communist party, Marxist philosophy, Marxist political economy, and "scientific" communism. Soviet history, as presented in textbooks, is merely a chain of events chosen from Soviet history to suit current Soviet policy. There is no mention in Soviet history of the mass killings carried out under Lenin's and Stalin's rules or of power struggles within the Communist party. The textbooks for history are changed every two to four years, just as in George Orwell's

1984, the Ministry of Truth changes historical records to suit its regimes policies.

Since this subject has no logical structure and its content changes, a student has no way of knowing how well he's doing and bad marks can be given arbitrarily, thus providing the state with a powerful lever to weed out undesirables. That is why the demands of Polish students to abolish compulsory courses in Marxism are so important. Marxism, as presented in Soviet universities, is distorted beyond recognition. The development of Marx as a philosopher is not studied and early Marx is absolutely off limits. Only those parts of Marx which the current regime finds useful for its purposes are studied. Marx's statement that, "A censored press only serves to demoralize. That greatest of vices, hypocrisy, is inseparable from it", would never be seen in a textbook on Marx. Students must also take "scientific" communism and are required to pass an oral final examination in this course before a board of examiners who have before them the Student's character report. The student can never be certain he can pass this exam unless he has shown he has been obedient and conformist.

Free thinking in disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, and law is

"A student's background is one of the most important factors the authorities consider when a student applies to university."

unheard of. Students in these disciplines undergo a rigorous selection process for many of them will eventually man the Soviet propaganda machine and administration. Applicants to law schools and foreign relations school are often selected on a family basis — a fact well known among Soviet students. At law school many students are weeded out during studies so only those who have proved themselves to be absolute conformists and have good academic standing continue to the end of their studies. For the most part, a Soviet lawyer is told what to think not how to think. A Soviet lawyer must learn to tolerate Article 77 of the Soviet penal code which

"At one university in Moscow a group of students were dismissed and sent to the army for mildly protesting about the quality of food in their university's cafeteria."

allows for the prolongation of prison terms and the execution of prisoners without any legal procedure. He also learns to tolerate show trials and the fabricated charges the state uses to rid itself of dissidents or anyone it disapproves of. Soviet psychiatrists, if they wish to get anywhere, must accept without questions that anti-Soviet activity is a form of schizophrenia and that psychology is, as is history, what the state says it is. The study of Marxist and other philosophies has gotten many Soviet philosophers into trouble and into

prison. At the technical university O. Shmelof was attending, a philosophy professor who taught critical thinking instead of passive acceptance was fired in 1974 after several warnings from the university's administration. During previous regimes state interference in academic affairs reached even higher levels of absurdity. Under Stalin's reign a famous biologist, Vavilov, was murdered for holding views on biology that Stalin disagreed with. The study of cybernetics during Stalin's time was disapproved of and scientists conducting research on it was dismissed and even imprisoned. At the same time the Americans were using cybernetics during the Korean war to computerize bomb sights. Shortly after Stalin's reign the ban on cybernetics was lifted but the imprisoned scientists were not released. At present, however, research in the sciences is not interfered with directly, yet all research scientists know they have to participate in brainwashing sessions join the Communist party and partake in its activities, and do compulsory agricultural work to be able to continue with their research work.

After graduating a student has to work for three years at a job the state appoints him to before he is allowed to apply for work elsewhere. Moscow citizens are appointed to jobs in Moscow and graduates from outside Moscow can be sent anywhere unless they have obtained a Moscow residence permit. Before July 1978, an outsider had to be married for six months to a Moscow citizen to obtain a residence permit, but because of the influx of outsiders who had arranged marriages of convenience this period was increased to three years. Soviet citizens are anxious to live in Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev because the standard of living in these cities is far better than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. These cities are artificial paradises, by Soviet standards, not western standards, which are created as showpieces for foreigners and havens for the administrative hierarchy. After a graduate's three year appointment is finished he can, in theory, move where he wishes. When he attempts to move, however, he has to contend with a vicious circle of conditions for moving. He cannot obtain a residence permit if he has no job in the city he wishes to move to. If he has no residence permit, he cannot obtain housing and he cannot obtain housing unless he has a job. A person cannot break out of this circle on his own, he has to induce the local administration to intervene on his behalf. Whether or not the local administration will help the applicant depends on local labour

"Perhaps the most important lesson a Soviet university student learns is that he must please the state to get ahead and to avoid trouble."

needs and how well the applicant has behaved and shown his devotion to the state. The state's grip on a graduate is not relinquished at graduation!

The state controls the distribution of housing, income, privileges higher education, and promotions. Needless to say, if a graduate wishes to further his education his academic performance is not the only factor taken into account by the

authorities when he applies for graduate school. His references from the Communist Party and the YCL, which he is a member of until age 28, can tip the scale either way.

In the Soviet Union there is no open market in housing; the factory or institution a graduate is assigned to work at allocates housing. A person can live up to twenty years in a dormitory while waiting to get an apartment. References from the Communist Party, the YCL, and the trade union one belongs to have to be re-submitted when applying for an apartment. One's professional performance and social activity can speed up the application process considerably. People living in dormitories are given only temporary residence permits and are dependent on the good graces of the state to have that permit renewed. If the permit isn't renewed the person has no right to medical service and can be arrested for not having a residence permit.

The system of privileges Soviet students became acquainted with through the YCL during their time at university plays an important role in their later life. Those who

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are most active professionally with the Communist Party or with their Trade Union, find that the services of the state are more available to them than others. For instance, they find it easier to place their children in daycare centres and they get trips to resorts for themselves and their children at greatly reduced prices. In the provinces where food stores only contain basic items such as bread, cereals, and milk, the distribution of fish, meat, eggs, butter and sausages is done through food cards given out at work. When demand exceeds supply the social activists are given preference. Upper level Communist party members in the Soviet Union enjoy the most privileges. They have access to the best food the Soviet Union and the West offers all year

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around as well as access to Western products which they can buy at special stores that only they can shop at!

The most fundamental feature of the Soviet system is that it places its citizens in a situation where they are dependent on the state for their basic human needs, freedom, housing, jobs, and in some cases food. This state of affairs is able to transform a person's psychological make-up and efface their humanity in a way analogous to Patricia Hearst's transformation when her kidnapers controlled her basic human needs. At least 20 million people were killed by Stalin's regime - murders were not invited from the outside. The system existing in the Soviet Union today is not so obviously brutal - it no longer kills people, it kills what makes them human. A Soviet citizen has to learn to suppress his conscience and mind and submit to the blueprint the state has drawn for him.