Business as an Anathema to Government: The Path to Private Business in the USSR

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The ideological underpinnings of the Soviet economic system are identified in the USSR Constitution; Article IV states that "the socialist ownership of the instruments and means of production" provides the economic foundation of the state. Article XI explains that the socialist economic system replaced market resource allocation by central decisions: "The economic life of the USSR is determined and directed by the state economic plan." This plan has the purpose of "increasing the public wealth, of steadily raising the material and cultural standards of the working people, and of consolidating the independence of the USSR and strengthening its defensive capacity."

By the end of World War II the socialist economic system had transformed an agrarian country into an industrialized world power. Post-war recovery was rapid. The fourth Five-Year Plan (1946-1950), aided by productive resources drawn from Eastern Europe and reparations from defeated nations, brought much of the economy up to pre-war levels. Rationing of consumer goods ended in December 1947 and a series of retail price reductions from 1947 to 1952 significantly increased real incomes in urban areas. However, the output of consumer goods failed to achieve planned levels. This deficiency represented a planning problem that was created by the very success of planning. The growth in prosperity was exceptionally rapid, especially after the deprivation during the 1930s and the War, and this led to a revolution of rising expectations.

Complaints about the quality of consumer goods appeared in the press almost as soon as rationing ended. There were reports of nails and forks that bent, luggage locks that would neither open nor close [Vakhitov, 1949], poorly designed and finished bicycles [Permyak, 1949], toys that self-destructed [Beltishchev, 1949], and defective electric light bulbs [Maksimov, 1949]. A retail store Director complained of poor quality shoes and stockings [Balakhnenkov, 1949]. Poor quality goods often remained unsold [Grek, 1949]. On the other hand, products shortages were reported for items such as lamps [Teterina, 1949] and repair parts for autos and radios [Chugunov, 1949; Pribylsky, 1949].

BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Volume Twenty-seven, no. 1, Fall 1998.
 ISSN 0894-6825.

These complaints continued unabated and the cause of the problem was identified again and again. *Trud* noted that "Mechanical, ill-considered planning still makes itself felt – planning 'in thin air,' without considering the changes in the life and habits of the working people of the various areas" [Carry on Trade, 1951]. A survey of readers' letters reported in *Izvestia* is typified by a single comment: "Due to the sluggishness and lack of interest of individual officials, the consumer does not always find what he needs in the stores" [Study and Satisfy Demands, 1951]. The Russian Deputy Minister of Trade recognized the on-going criticism and acknowledged that improvements were needed in the planning process [Pravotorov, 1952].

Weakness of the Planning System

In private enterprise economies, market forces achieve a number of balances; supply and demand for goods and monetary resources are balanced by prices and interest rates. Soviet planners attempted to achieve such balances by central decisions. For example, the demand and supply of consumer goods were balanced by adjusting consumer incomes and the output of goods. Raw materials and the intermediate goods and services needed to produce consumer goods also had to be balanced with the demands of other sectors, including the military. Plans identified aggregate objectives, such as tons of output, and these objectives often were incompatible.

Rapid economic growth was achieved by straining producing enterprises. The fundamental target for any enterprise, gross output, typically exceeded enterprise capacity. Problems also arose because ministries did not consult subordinate enterprises when drafting plans, and producers often failed to notify customers of bottlenecks that prevented deliveries of promised inputs. Unforeseen contingencies meant that resources intended for one purpose were preempted for another, with detrimental impacts on other sectors. Faced with unattainable demands, managers hoarded whatever was available in the "official" economy regardless of the needs of their enterprises. These hoarded inputs were then bartered or sold when opportunities arose.

Planning became more complicated after World War II because housing, agriculture, and consumer goods all became important. But the planning system had been designed to deal with the single objective of rapid economic growth; this, in turn, meant an emphasis on investment in heavy industry. The share of resources available to consumer goods industries fell continually until the mid 1960s; until that time, increased consumer goods production was to be derived solely from increases in total output.

Communist Party influence over managerial appointments meant that administrative positions often were entrusted to "unqualified and sometimes to questionable individuals" [Egadze, 1952]. Party interference probably limited the group from which managers were chosen and thus reduced the level of managerial competence. Still more important was the corruption inherent in the system which meant that the political structure benefited from the status quo. The economic bureaucracy also engendered corruption. Once appointed,

managers continued to be evaluated on the basis of loyalty rather than efficiency. However, loyalty to superiors did not oblige subordinates actually to fulfill commands; falsified performance reports were the rule rather than the exception. Enterprise managers offered a variety of goods and services as bribes to those who appointed them, and to other superiors and colleagues who could help them in their careers. The relative unimportance of economic efficiency allowed managers to absorb the costs of bribery without being held accountable.

The Beginnings of Reform Efforts: The Khrushchev Era (1953-1965)

Malenkov, Khrushchev's rival for power after Stalin's death, proposed reductions in heavy industry and military expenditures and an expansion of consumer goods output. Khrushchev gained political support by proposing to retain the traditional emphasis on heavy industry and offered schemes such as the cultivation of "Virgin Lands" in the east. However, Khrushchev realized that his regime required the public support that would be gained from a rising level of living. Thus, some consumer goods prices were lowered and the output of consumer durables was increased.

An impressive rate of economic growth was achieved in the early 1950s, but the economic successes of the early post-war years led to over-optimism, so that the sixth Five-Year Plan had to be abandoned and was replaced by a more moderate Seven-Year plan (1959-1965) which also proved to be overly optimistic. The expansion of consumer goods output did not meet expectations, and there was abundant evidence of continued dissatisfaction with the available goods. The press repeatedly complained that enterprises turned out low-grade items that were unsaleable [Produce Attractive, High-Grade Goods, 1954]. The USSR Minister of Trade formally recognized that "The people's demand for furniture, lumber, cement, household machines and certain other machines is not being fully met," and "[a]long with the shortage of some items, trade organizations have surplus stocks of kitchen hardware, haberdashery, perfume, certain kinds of watches, and staple fabrics...principally because many of them have been made in the same form, color, and design for several years" [Pavlov, 1956]. The situation remained unchanged at the end of the decade: "Many trade organizations, and also enterprises manufacturing consumer goods, have failed to take into consideration the major changes that have taken place in trade in recent times, arising mainly out of the increase in the production of goods and the changes in public demand" [Skovoroda, 1960].

Khrushchev considered the planning bureaucracy to be one cause of economic shortcomings, because of empire building, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate attention to regional coordination. The 1957 Reform established a system of regional economic councils (*Sovnarkhozy*) so that communication no longer moved along vertical ministerial lines but moved horizontally, along territorial lines. However, the planning procedure remained unchanged and enterprises still were required to fulfill centralized targets, such as steel tonnage produced. But the newly created *Sovnarkhozy* not only had deficiencies similar

to those of the ministries they replaced, but also tended to give local interests top priority. Corruption also continued to be an important problem. In 1962 Khrushchev mentioned bribes for allocating housing and land, admission to colleges and universities, and awarding education certificates and academic diplomas [Simis, 1977-78, p. 39].

By 1962 the economic situation had deteriorated to the extent that open debate on planning deficiencies was sanctioned. The primary proposal, made by Evsei Liberman, was to change economic factors rather than make administrative changes and to focus effort on the enterprise rather than the planning bureaucracy. Liberman addressed a major problem facing enterprise managers – the large number of assigned objectives and the impossibility of reconciling these objectives – by eliminating all but three centrally planned objectives. Bonuses paid for achieving these objectives would depend upon the achievement of a target profitability rate.

This proposal was criticized on many grounds. Some objected to the central role assigned to profits because this seemed too much like capitalism. Others feared that the plan's introduction would result in fluctuating prices, unemployment, and subordinating capital goods output to the production of consumer goods. Inconsistencies also were noted; fulfillment of the assigned targets of product assortments, production goals, and delivery dates might conflict with the achievement of profitability goals. The debate was continuing when Khrushchev was removed from office in 1964.

The Brezhnev Era (1964-1985)

The period from 1964 to 1985 is generally referred to as the Brezhnev era because the tenures of the next two leaders, Andropov and Chernenko, were too short to have a significant impact on the reform process. Brezhnev came to power in October 1964 and remained in office until his death in November 1982. He was succeeded by Andropov, the former head of the KGB, who died in February 1984. Chernenko, who succeeded Andropov, died after thirteen months in office.

Kosygin, Brezhnev's chief rival for power, proposed reforms that echoed those of Malenkov a decade earlier. However, Kosygin's proposals were sufficiently "radical" that Brezhnev managed to portray his own proposals as a lesser threat to the traditional values of Soviet Society. Brezhnev recentralized the planning bureaucracy in 1965 and Khrushchev's regional economic councils were abandoned. A further structural change combined enterprises into large "production associations," to gain economies of scale, and reduce bureaucracy. The close control of enterprise managers by planning authorities was to be reduced. Managers were to be encouraged to respond to various economic "levers," such as profits and bonuses, and increased authority over investment, thus making enterprises more efficient.

However, the impact of the reform was limited by the planning bureaucracy, which simply refused to approve changes that an enterprise wished to make [Seleznev, 1965], nullified contracts made by enterprises [Sobolev, 1966;

Zolotov and Antonenko, 1967], and appropriated any "surplus" profit earned [Borshch, 1965]. Moreover, there were "undesirable" managerial actions, because loopholes in the plan made it possible for managers to increase profit without lowering cost, or to increase wages without increasing productivity. Managers also obtained very large shares of bonus funds, costs often were not reduced, and labor productivity and quality improvement received little attention. These loopholes were closed by limiting managerial discretion.

Since the reform only addressed the enterprise level of the planning structure, leaving intact the planning system logic, enterprises continued to face shortages of capital equipment and other inputs that made it difficult to meet output goals. Factory machinery was unreliable and spare parts often were unobtainable [Tkachev, Kravchuk and Vasilyev, 1968]. Similarly, retail shops lacked calculating cash registers and other essential equipment [Pavlov, 1968]. Enterprises also faced operational inconsistencies and prices continued to be established by central authority without reference to economic factors, so some enterprises were very profitable whereas others found it impossible to make profits [Bakanov, Serebryakov, and Fefilov, 1967].

The eighth Five-Year Plan (1966-70) called for rapidly increasing production of consumer durables; for example, television output was to double and refrigerator output was to triple. An agreement was made with Fiat to cooperate in auto production, which was to increase by 30 percent. However, no major reallocation of resources occurred; the Plan envisioned an increased supply of consumer goods arising from a restoration of previous rates of economic growth. Soviet economic growth deteriorated in the 1970s but the Brezhnev regime seemed more concerned with maintaining internal political stability than with economic growth. After the Czechoslovak crisis of 1968-9 suggested that economic reform could threaten Soviet political stability, any hope of substantial economic reform was lost.

Consumers were still "taking advantage of their more important position in the economy, buying the things they like and letting the others stand." Thus unsold goods became "a more and more frequent phenomenon" [Tyukov, 1967, p. 19]. The USSR Minister of Trade publicly recognized shortages, "particularly suits, men's and women's 100% wool coats, fashionable leather, chrome-leather and patent leather footwear, and Turkish towels...refrigerators of certain models, heavy-duty motorcycles with sidecars, high-quality furniture suites, and enameled chinaware and earthenware dishes" [Struyev, 1973]. Queues at retail stores and gas stations also brought complaints.

Shortages were closely linked with continued poor quality; suits and dresses disintegrated when cleaned and even the managers of shoe factories wore imported shoes [Tarasyuk, 1976]. Consumer goods did not meet world standards: "When we talk of new products...many of them, in terms of quality level, lag behind world achievements in their field" [Borodin, 1973]. Refrigerators lacked automatic defrosting, for example. Poor quality meant few purchases and large inventories of unsaleable goods, especially clothing and shoes [Kravchenko, 1973].

Although few industrial ministries fulfilled plans for consumer goods production during the ninth Five-Year Plan (1971-75), the tenth Five-Year Plan (1976-80) promised a 32% increase in the production of consumer goods. In December 1977 it was announced that this target would not be met [Podgorny and Georgadze, 1976; Shipler, 1977]. With earlier reform abandoned and economic growth continuing to decline, other means were sought to improve economic performance. From the mid-1970s to Brezhnev's death in 1982, several "reforms" were announced. The most significant of these was a decree in July 1979 that specified ways to make the planning system more effective, including better information on enterprise capacity, norms to replace enterprise indicators, greater emphasis on long-term plans and contracting between enterprises. Still, resource allocation remained unchanged.

By the end of the Brezhnev era the situation of the Soviet consumer was much as it had been twenty years before. Officials still reported that industry "regularly fails to fill the trade network's orders, citing insufficient raw materials and capacity. The upshot is that first there's a surplus of goods, and then there's a shortage" [Darbinyan, 1984]. It was estimated that only thirty percent of the demand of young people for clothing was met, "The vacuum is filled by expensive articles from custom tailoring shops and by the services of profiteers and private clothing makers of various sorts" [Logachev, 1984].

Unofficial Sphere of Society

The failure of the Soviet system to provide meaningful rewards for individual effort caused people to divert their energy to "unofficial" activities intended to improve their lives. That is, private activity, neither state controlled nor mandated, became more rewarding than "official" activity. One manifestation of this privatism was unofficial cultural and social activity, including art, music, and literature, and foreign sources of information, including radio broadcasts and contact with foreign visitors. Planning deficiencies also led to an immense volume of unofficial economic activity, some intended to achieve official objectives and some for personal gain.

Enterprise managers, who often could not obtain needed inputs from official sources, developed many production and exchange techniques in contravention of the law so that they could meet plan targets. Superiors not only were aware that managers engaged in these unofficial activities but expected them to do so, since this activity allowed the planning system to function better than it otherwise would. Such activity also enabled managers to fulfill planned objectives and thus to maintain their positions and earn bonuses. But sometimes managers were prosecuted for engaging in such unofficial activity.

Production and distribution of agricultural products from private plots and "garden plots" was officially discouraged from 1953 to 1964. In the 1950s "personal auxiliary farming" was "subjected to administrative and ideological attacks as a 'vestige' of the past. This policy ultimately had an adverse effect...on the growth of the people's material well-being." But, in 1964 the "unwarranted restrictions" were lifted and "steps taken to assist the public in

developing private plots" [Raig, 1984]. Private agricultural production was encouraged in the late 1970s and early 1980s when harvests were very poor. The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* article on the "small plot of land around the house that is worked by the holder," explicitly recognized the need for such plots: "The economic reason for the existence of personal subsidiary plots...is that social production does not yet fully provide society with agricultural products" [Personal Subsidiary Plot, 1977].

Private Trading

"Speculators" were those who bought goods legally in areas where these goods were available and resold elsewhere at higher prices. Sometimes speculators emerged because collective farms had no way to transport produce to market [Zabolotny, 1972]. Nevertheless, speculators often were arrested [Dubov, 1972; Glazkov, 1972]. Even if intermediaries were officially ignored they might be criticized. For example, those who used their private automobiles to transport goods to market were said to engage in "immoral and antisocial action" which "will soon rob a man of all dignity, of his honesty, conscience and capacity for shame" [Bochkarev and Zanozin, 1974]. Popular aversion to private trading was especially apparent when children were involved. Children discovered selling flowers in a market brought the argument that since the market "is a bad place for children... It is necessary to forbid children categorically to engage in trade" [Alexandrov, 1955]. More generally, "Parents who send their children to the marketplace are out of step with the 20th century" [Niyazmatov and Shchekochikhin, 1976].

A limited amount of private trading in second-hand goods was legal. Commission stores established by the state provided one means of selling second-hand goods, but flea markets seemed to be preferred. As the need for private trading continued to increase, flea markets were permitted in many large cities, and it was not unusual for the goods sold in these markets to be "relatively new and stylish" rather than second hand [Yakovlev, 1983].

Private Production

A review of permitted private production noted that "Individual labor in the sphere of handicrafts, agriculture and consumer services is permitted in the USSR by law." Specific types of legal activity included tailoring, carpentry, watch repair, hairdressing, carpet weaving, and motor vehicle repair, as well as personal services such as medical and dental care, private instruction, and legal practice. Such individual labor seemed to gain favor; the tax on income earned from private production was reduced several times after 1970 [Zavadskaya, 1984].

Large scale private production that involved hiring workers supposedly was illegal, but "moonlighters" provided needed services. For example, during the summer groups of students, professionals, and others formed so-called construction brigades that offered their services to enterprises and farms. Although this activity seems to have been tolerated by the authorities, it often

was illegal because stolen building materials were used. One elaborate scheme to provide bricks for construction at a state farm involved the "disappearance" of trainloads of bricks from a large brick plant. One of the farm's directors explained his violation of the law by asking "What else could we do?... The higher-ups come around and praise us: We're doing 'big construction.' Nobody cares how we got the damned bricks" [Shcherban, 1985].

Production for private sale also was carried out in state factories using materials and labor that were not required to meet planned output targets. Such surplus output passed through official channels, but was purchased and sold on private account. The labor was provided by workers already employed at the plant, who received unrecorded overtime rates. The output was distributed in the same manner as official output but was bought and sold on private account. Such operations were profitable, despite high wages and bribes to officials, because the material used was stolen from the state. Sometimes private production within a state enterprise was especially ingenious. Sinyavsky describes a case in which workers at a city transport depot restored a tram that had been scrapped and placed it in service. Of course the fares received were retained by the workers [Sinyavsky, 1990, p. 181].

Corruption

Transcending the economic significance of unoffical activity was its effect on corruption. The Soviet political system developed a tradition of corruption reaching into nearly all corners of society and up and down nearly all levels of the formal hierarchy. It was common for individuals to pay bribes simply to ensure that bureaucrats and others would perform their official functions. Bribes also induced officials to commit illegal acts. For example, highway police received bribes so that drivers could avoid the legal consequences of traffic violations.

Theft was common, varying in scale from trivial to vast, and often remained unpunished [Serobyan, 1976]. One of the reasons for widespread dishonesty was that "The Party's rule that cadres should be selected for their political and businesslike qualities is flagrantly violated. The wrong kind of people – speculators and plunderers of public property – often manage to get jobs that involve the safeguarding of valuable property" [On Intensifying the Struggle, 1955].

Some persons were able to profit because they had first access to goods. Retail store workers were able to appropriate goods that were in short supply to sell privately at inflated prices. Goods also could be obtained by cheating customers and suppliers. Retail store clerks shared the proceeds of under-the-counter sales with their store managers. Sometimes goods that were unavailable in retail stores could be obtained illegally from other sources. Automobiles owned by the state were offered for hire by their drivers when not needed for "official" business. Official drivers also were able to steal gasoline coupons to sell to consumers.

Illegal private trading greatly expanded opportunities for corruption. Managers of stores and other enterprises bribed auditors and inspectors. Even those charged with the custody of state property were bribed to permit theft [Simis, 1977-78]. Bribes provided "good will" that was useful to protect oneself from investigations and punishment: "There are officials who not only ignore the actions of the speculators' accomplices but who sometimes actually come to their defense or try to cover up for them" [Dorogavtsev, 1956]. Corrupt officials often escaped punishment [Gavrilko, 1968], and if discovered, punishment often was very light. A Party official supervising the construction of a Moscow apartment building, who altered the plans to have a private apartment added, received a reprimand "because he deplores the offenses" [Punished for Abuses, 1984]. But sometimes the offenses were so serious that the death penalty was imposed; two important trade officials were executed in 1984 [In the USSR Supreme Court, 1984].

The Extent of Private Economic Activity

Consumers typically met their needs for better clothing and other goods, medical care, and education by purchases in unofficial markets that were referred to variously as "parallel" or "underground" markets; the unofficial production and distribution of goods and services collectively often was referred to as the "second economy." Simes contended that "The ordinary Soviet citizen uses the parallel market on an almost daily basis" [1975, p. 44]. The reference is confined to the "ordinary" citizen because members of the elite did not need the parallel market; they had access to special shops selling scarce goods, special medical care, and recreational facilities.

Several attempts have been made to estimate the economic impact of this "second economy." One estimate is that in the 1970s, ten to twelve percent of Soviet personal income came from private sources [Gregory and Stuart, 1990, p. 275]; "It would seem on the basis of reports published in Soviet periodicals, that the entire Soviet economic system could not survive without the parallel market" [Simes, 1975, p. 48]. Another estimate is that in the 1980s urban consumers obtained 45% of their apartment repairs, half of clothing repairs, and 30% of home appliance repairs from the second economy [Hewett, 1988, p. 180]. In the first half of 1989 a survey found that nearly two-thirds of all families purchased goods from "speculators" paying prices that averaged nearly one-third above those in state stores [Schroeder, 1982, p. 98].

Gorbachev's Reform Efforts (1985-1991)

Gorbachev's initial response to the Soviet economic difficulties was based on squeezing more output from the existing structure. An anti-alcohol campaign was aimed at increasing productivity, and emphasis was placed on labor discipline. In January 1988 planning reform reminiscent of the Liberman proposals took the form of a *Law on State Enterprise.* This Law was intended to motivate enterprises to increase output quality and to adjust output to meet

customer needs. However, as in the case of the 1965 reform, enterprise management typically raised wages and salaries and failed to meet planned output targets.

The deficiencies of the old system were continually denounced in the media; a change was needed in the way things were done rather than just a change in the planning structure. There was a recognition that the private economic activity that had emerged within the framework of shortages and low-quality goods had led to consumer benefits. Of course this was a heresy. Private enterprise meant private gain, and private gain was associated with capitalist exploitation. On the other hand, it was recognized that private enterprise could meet needs that were not being met by the state. The ideologically explosive nature of a move toward a market economy was obvious, and Gorbachev had to overcome strong opposition. However, in July 1987 a *Law on Private Economic Activity* was introduced allowing a wide range of private economic activities to be carried out, either on a part-time basis, or by students or pensioners. A *Law on Cooperatives,* enacted in July 1988, permitted the operation of small-scale urban cooperatives such as restaurants and auto repair facilities. However, private business activity frequently was obstructed by local authorities and restrictive legislation, as well as by blackmailing by official distributors and the underworld.

In 1991 there was a general collapse of state planning and the deterioration of the economy accelerated. A shortage of imports, caused by balance of payments problems, limited food processing and light industries. Investment in many sectors of the economy had been falling for several years, so that existing plant and equipment could not maintain needed production levels. Trade limitations, imposed by newly independent regions and republics trying to protect their consumers, further limited the supply of consumer goods. Pravda reported: "Society is literally filled with fear of possible unemployment, of inflation, of the long lines in stores... Add to that the jumps in prices, wages that buy less and less, and the threat of losing the housing one already has or the prospect of never getting out of a communal apartment [Volynsky, 1991].

In brief, the Gorbachev reform efforts were too little, and too late.

Conclusion

The issue of economic reform was on the agenda of every regime after Stalin's death, but it took nearly forty years to recognize that partial reform would not solve the problems inherent in the command system. The failure of the central planning mechanism to meet the growing and increasingly sophisticated demands of the population caused illegal private business activity to expand. Private trade, and even private manufacturing, flourished and further corrupted state and party officials who became caught up in the illegal economy, both as active participants and as recipients of bribes to permit illegal activity. This corruption contributed to the failure of attempts to bring an orderly transition, so the market economy burst forth and initiated a new revolution.

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