



SOVIET SOCIAL PROBLEMS



edited by
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The John M. Olin Critical Issues Series

Westview Press

Soviet Social Problems

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BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD

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Song on p. 300 by Bulat Okudzhava. Translation by Gerald Stanton Smith. Quoted from Gerald Stanton Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 125, reprinted by permission.

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Published in 1991 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Soviet social problems / edited by Anthony Jones, Walter D. Connor, David E. Powell.

p. cm. — (The John M. Olin critical issues series)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8133-7690-4 (HC) — ISBN 0-8133-0876-3 (PB)

1. Soviet Union—Social conditions—1970— . 2. Soviet Union—
Politics and government—1985— . 3. Social problems. I. Jones,

Anthony. II. Connor, Walter D. III. Powell, David E. IV. Series.

HN523.5.S665 1991

361'.0947—dc20

90-20685

CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements
of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the John M. Olin Foundation for its generous support of the Olin Lecture Series, at which preliminary versions of the chapters in this book were presented. We would also like to express our appreciation to our friends and colleagues at the Russian Research Center. Adam B. Ulam, the center's director, and Marshall I. Goldman, associate director, have been staunch supporters of all the volumes in this series, including the present one. We are grateful for their encouragement and advice. The contributors to this book deserve our gratitude for their cooperation and good humor during often trying times. Finally, we are especially indebted to Alison Koff of the Russian Research Center and to Susan McEachern, Rebecca Ritke, Jane Raese, and Marian Safran of Westview Press. Without their skills, dedication, and patience, this volume could not have been completed.

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Introduction

For most of the Soviet period, the leaders of the USSR have either denied that their society was prone to the same problems that other industrial societies were experiencing or claimed that its problems were a leftover from the past and destined to disappear. This unwillingness to recognize the existence of undesirable phenomena or events extended even to the news coverage of accidents and natural disasters. As a result, Soviet citizens had no way of knowing the true extent of the problems facing their society; they had to rely mainly on personal experience and rumor. This situation has now dramatically changed; consequently, the contributors to this book have been able to describe both the nature and the scope of social problems in the contemporary Soviet Union.

The degree of openness that the policy of *glasnost* has made possible is so great and so new that we are still trying to sort out and understand all that we are hearing. Whenever a set of issues is opened up to public view for the first time, there are inevitably distortions, exaggerations, and misperceptions that make it difficult for outside observers to evaluate properly what the real situation is. Also, when new problems come under public scrutiny initially, the explanations for their emergence are likely to be distorted. As a result, the analyses in this book should be seen as preliminary, for we shall almost certainly have to revise both the data and our understanding of them as time goes by.

There are virtually no problems that are not now being discussed and investigated in the Soviet Union, including those that were ideologically very sensitive just a few years ago. For example, homelessness was formerly said in the USSR to be a characteristic only of capitalist societies, and as late as October 1986, President Nikolai Ryzhkov still publicly denied that homelessness existed in the Soviet Union. Although there had been occasional references to people without homes during the 1970s, it was not really until *Ogonek* published a story in February 1987 about a journalist who had lived among the homeless while pretending to be one of them that the issue became established as a problem for open discussion.¹

An astonishing frankness about social problems in the USSR was in evidence at the 19th Party Conference, which took place in Moscow in June 1988. There delegates openly discussed a wide range of issues, in-

cluding the crisis of the health system, the extent of ecological damage in the Soviet Union, and the difficulties faced by Soviet women. The debate on these and other topics was reported in the Soviet press.² Since then, the press has been of crucial importance in alerting the public to the problems the society faces, and both print and electronic media have taken on the role of muckrakers similar to that of media in the West. Indeed, the coverage of prostitution, drug addiction, violence, begging, corruption, and other social ills has become so intense, and often so sensational in its presentation, that there have been many complaints from the public that things have gone too far. Without the contribution of the media, however, it is unlikely that Soviet citizens could have been alerted as quickly and as effectively as they have been to the problems around them. The speed with which these formerly taboo areas have been opened up has its costs, though, since it is painful for people who have for so long been unaware of these issues to confront them all at once. For many, it is a welcome and refreshing change, whereas for others it is unsettling and threatening. As in other societies, therefore, the messenger of these bad tidings has come under much criticism.

It is impossible in a single volume to look at all of the problems currently being discussed in the Soviet Union; thus we have had to be selective in our coverage. Nevertheless, we have tried to present as wide and as representative a sample as possible. As the problems we examine do not exist in isolation, the reader will notice that there is a degree of overlap in some of the chapters. Because social problems are organically interrelated, the overlap has been left (and in some cases encouraged) in order to demonstrate where appropriate that a specific problem is part of a wider set of problems. We have also tried to arrange the chapters so that they build upon one another and give the reader a sense of continuity as well as linkage.

To get us started, in Chapter 1, Paul Hollander examines the politics of social problems. He discusses the political changes that have allowed many social phenomena to be defined as problems and the political consequences of opening up such issues to public scrutiny. As he notes, social problems in the Soviet Union stem from three main factors—the industrialization of the country, which has been occurring since the early part of the century; policies that were pursued for a variety of political and ideological reasons; and attempts to impose a particular moral view on an increasingly diverse society. Responses by the public to these factors have included a wide array of behaviors, including many that are now regarded as problems. The long-term implications of the new willingness to face these issues are set out by Hollander, and he discusses the extent to which Soviet problems are evidence for increasing similarity between the USSR and other industrial societies.

The current degree of public awareness of the problems facing Soviet society could not have been possible without the vigorous activity of the media, especially Soviet television. It is to this issue that Ellen Mickiewicz

addresses herself in Chapter 2, in particular to the tension between national and local concerns as reflected in television coverage. As she notes, television functions as a major socializing agent in modern societies. This assumes a special significance in the USSR: The country has a large number of ethnic groups and nationalities, and nationality tensions and conflicts are currently at the center of the stage in Soviet events. The analysis provided by Mickiewicz will help us to understand better the complex role of television in shaping the public's knowledge of, and attitudes toward, social problems in the years to come.

One of the most expensive and frightening problems confronting the new leadership is that of environmental catastrophe, and this is the theme of the next two chapters. Marshall Goldman sets out for us in Chapter 3 the nature of environmental problems in the Soviet Union and the ways in which leaders and officials have responded to them. As in other countries, a real environmental movement has emerged in the USSR, and through a comparison of three environmental problems (the pollution of Lake Baikal, the consequences of trying to reverse the flow of several rivers, and the disaster at Chernobyl), he identifies the factors that make some environmental protests successful and others not. This account provides a valuable background against which to understand the recent proliferation and politicization of environmental-protection groups, including the emergence of the Greens, a political movement similar in its aims to the Greens in Western Europe.

The nuclear accident at Chernobyl has had an effect all over the world on attitudes to nuclear power, and almost five years after the event we are still trying to assess its full consequences.³ The accident was the culmination of a series of problems in the Soviet nuclear industry, and in Chapter 4, Paul Josephson shows how these problems arose out of the "atomic culture" that has developed in the USSR since the end of World War II. This account helps us to understand not only the events that led up to the accident but also the reactions of the industry and state officials to the accident and to the policies that followed in its wake.

Environmental issues and health are closely linked, and as Mark Field shows in Chapter 5, the health-care system itself has come to be seen as a problem. As he notes, in this area as in so many others, the past habit of blaming individuals for the crisis of health care has given way to a more honest examination of the shortcomings of the system as a whole. The backwardness of Soviet medicine, the lack of basic facilities in the hospitals and clinics, and the inability of the system to deliver adequate health care to people in all social groups and geographic regions have all contributed to difficulties in the rest of society. Infant mortality, high age-specific death rates (especially for males), and the prevalence of incapacitating diseases and conditions have negative consequences for the economy, quite apart from the human suffering. The lack of items as basic as disposable syringes has led to the unnecessary spread of AIDS in the Soviet Union. As Field shows, the cost of dealing with this and other problems

in the health-care system will be enormous and will take a considerable amount of time.

Drug abuse is a problem being newly discussed these days, though as John Kramer points out in Chapter 6, it has been around for a long time. As was the case with other social ills, there have been official denials for decades that drugs were a problem in the USSR, and only since 1988 have data been made public on the extent of drug use. In his comprehensive look at this issue, Kramer provides us with a detailed picture of who the drug users are, how usage differs from one part of the country to another, and the factors that have led to increased drug use. The nature and scope of drug abuse, the author concludes, make it likely that for the foreseeable future it will continue to plague the Soviet Union.

Although the drug problem is serious, it is dwarfed by the size of the drinking problem in Soviet society, an issue taken up by Vladimir Treml in Chapter 7. Although the excessive use of alcohol has a long history, during the 1970s overconsumption reached an unprecedented level. This culminated in the ill-fated antidrinking campaign introduced in the spring of 1985, a campaign that was to prove a failure and be ultimately rejected. As Treml shows, the campaign produced a number of worse problems (such as the increased consumption of homemade alcohol and of other more dangerous substances) and even damaged the state of the economy. Both the magnitude and the tenacity of the alcohol problem emerge clearly from the author's detailed account of patterns of drinking.

Some of the changes associated with *perestroika* have raised the question of social justice. Issues of privilege, increasing income inequality, the fortunes being made by many of the private businessmen, and the emergence of private health care and private education have disturbed many people. Walter Connor considers opportunity, success, and fairness in Chapter 8 against the background of economic reform. He shows that there is a complex web linking the economic, educational, and social spheres, and reforms in one area are likely to undermine the effectiveness of reforms in other areas. Because there seems to be no way in which demands for "justice" in all of these spheres can be equally met, definitions of what is and is not just will have to change, a process that is already under way.

For those who have not fared well in the race for equality and justice, much of this debate must seem academic at best. Many people in the Soviet Union live in, or on the margins of, poverty. Others, because of a variety of infirmities, illnesses, and social isolation, live very limited and impoverished lives. In the past, the state was supposed to be responsible for helping them, but now there has been open acknowledgment of a legitimate role to be played by and a desperate need for charity. This relatively new approach to dealing with social problems is analyzed in Chapter 9 by Mervyn Matthews, who describes those parts of the population most in need of help, the extent to which the official policies and agencies aided them in the past, and the new organizations that have sprung up to provide assistance. There are now, as he points out, a growing

number of official and unofficial charities in the USSR, and religious organizations of various kinds are becoming increasingly involved in charitable activities. It is also interesting to note the increasing number of charitable "funds" of various kinds, devoted to the needs of children, veterans, Chernobyl victims, and earthquake survivors; there are even funds to help rescue the villages and to help preserve *perestroika* itself. The reemergence of charity is one of the more unexpected developments of recent years and a movement that may well be here to stay.

Many of the elderly are in need of charity, and it is the special status and needs of this group to which Chapter 10, by David Powell, is devoted. The Soviet Union is an aging society (especially in the most industrialized, Western republics), a situation that creates a set of new problems for which the society is unprepared. As in almost every society, the elderly in the USSR are a highly vulnerable part of the population. As Powell shows, the elderly suffer from the shortcomings of the health system and from the faltering economy. Moreover, the lack of sufficient part-time jobs or other ways to supplement their pensions make the elderly especially vulnerable to the current shortages and inflation. Although there are plans to protect the elderly from the full impact of economic restructuring, a significant improvement in their condition will be possible only when the nation's general conditions improve. Moreover, current trends in family life are likely to add to the problems of the elderly.

In a sense, the family has been seen as a problem ever since the Revolution of 1917, and policies regarding the status of the family have changed dramatically from one period to another. As Peter Juviler shows in Chapter 11, an account of the problems facing the Soviet family in the past as well as at the current time, what goes on in the family has important implications for a wide variety of other social issues. With urbanization and industrialization, plus the special characteristics of Soviet development, the family has faced increasing problems, frequently too much for the family to deal with. The number of one-parent families is increasing in the Soviet Union, as it is in other countries, with similar complex effects on society.

The family is a notoriously difficult institution to change through policies, as is the school, which is the topic of Chapter 12, by Anthony Jones. As he shows, at a time when the educational system is being called upon to make major contributions to the program of *perestroika*, the system is facing enormous problems of its own. Not only have recent attempts to reform education been ineffective, having in some ways made the situation worse, but also the schools have been allowed to fall into such a state of disrepair that enormous monetary investments in them will be needed before they can begin to contribute much to the regeneration of Soviet society. In addition, a profound change in the training of teachers, and in the psychology of all those who inhabit the schools, is necessary if the schools are to turn out the kinds of people that an economically, politically, and socially reconstructed USSR will demand. As Jones suggests, however,

reforming this inherently conservative and resistant institution is likely to be a long and difficult task.

The problems facing young people are analyzed by Richard Dobson in Chapter 13. As he notes, there are many aspects of youth issues that appear in all industrial societies, and the development of separate youth cultures, a tendency to be drawn toward deviant behavior, and difficulties in making the transition to adulthood are common themes. At the same time, there are a number of problems that are specific to Soviet conditions, and given the nature of the Soviet political system, these have taken on a special significance. It is impossible now to generalize about young people in the Soviet Union, and Dobson provides us with a comprehensive survey of the variety of life-styles, ideologies, and behaviors that characterize youth in the USSR. The fate of *perestroika* in the coming years will depend more and more on the responses of those now entering adulthood, and they are bringing with them a complex and conflict-laden set of desires and attitudes.

The social problem most frightening to many people is crime, the dimensions of which are described by Louise Shelley in Chapter 14. Ironically, public concern about crime is increasing just at the time that judicial and penal reforms are under way and a more humane approach to the treatment of offenders is being introduced. Sociologically, perhaps, this is not surprising, because in times of transition the weakening of old norms frequently increases the incidence of deviance, including criminal deviance. Shelley's analysis provides a valuable survey of how the issue of crime was dealt with before the current reforms and sets the scene for her account of how *glasnost* has changed the situation. As she notes, a new openness exists about the extent of crime in the USSR, and on the basis of the statistics being published, it is now possible to form some preliminary ideas about that extent. Although honestly facing this issue is necessary if it is to be dealt with, the publicity also fuels people's fears and dissatisfactions, and the rising rate of crime can become a focus for widespread discontent. Efforts are being made to deal with the current spate of crime, but the police seem ill equipped to deal with it, and there are now reports that the KGB is spending most of its time these days investigating crimes.

A noncriminal "crime" getting more attention these days is prostitution, an activity that is dealt with with a degree of frankness that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. In Chapter 15, Andrea Stevenson Sanjian describes the legal and ideological climate that has surrounded prostitution during the Soviet period and then examines the portrait of prostitutes that emerged from recent Soviet research. As is true of other social problems, prostitution has a Soviet "character" about it, a result of the special conditions within which prostitutes must work. Low wages, high expectations, lack of privacy, and the need to pay many bribes put their special stamp on the way this trade is conducted, and the prudish attitude toward open discussion of sexual matters makes prostitution especially difficult to deal with in a rational way. A recent complication, as Sanjian notes, is the outbreak of AIDS in the USSR, the spread of which

has become linked in the public mind (rightly or wrongly) with prostitution. For this and other reasons, there seems to be a move toward the gradual criminalization of prostitution, although it is too early to say just how far this process will go. As the author shows, the role of the press has been of great importance in bringing prostitution to public awareness and in helping to define it as a "problem."

The goal of *perestroika*, and the rationale behind the democratization of the society, are to bring the Soviet Union into the world community of industrial nations and make it a modern, technologically sophisticated nation. It is to this issue that Loren Graham draws our attention in Chapter 16, a probing analysis of the place of technology in Soviet culture since the revolution. In the early Soviet period, there was clearly a cult of the machine, and the utopia that technology was thought able to produce was limited only by the imagination of its acolytes. There seemed no problem that the machine could not solve, no human failing that it could not eliminate. With a degree of industrial maturity, however, and with a recognition of some of the serious repercussions that industrial technology brings in its wake, an inevitable reaction has set in. The result, Graham notes, is a clash between the desire for a return to pastoral innocence and the campaign to move to a high-tech future. The nostalgia for the past comes at an inopportune time, given the extent of the problems and the urgency of finding solutions. Moreover, Graham shows, because of certain characteristics of Soviet society, it is more difficult for the USSR to make the transition to new technologies than it was for most other societies—thus, a change in "ethos" will be necessary in addition to a complete reorganization of systems of management.

As the contributors to this volume show, the Soviet Union is facing a veritable explosion of social problems precisely at the time that a concentration of energies and resources is needed for the transition to a more effective economy, without which the future of the society is very much in doubt. Some of the problems discussed in this volume have been around for a long time, whereas others are relatively new, but in the public mind, unfortunately, they are all linked in some way with *perestroika*. Consequently, changes that are crucial for national survival come to be seen as at best painful and at worst destructive. The effect of this on the national will can be easily imagined, and the possibility that some people will exploit the situation for their own ends is very real. As in any society, there are always those who capitalize on the distress of others.

On a more positive note, the greater honesty with which the society is treating its shortcomings is a necessary step toward finding solutions. It is now a commonplace in the Soviet Union that the decades-long denial that anything was wrong was a recipe for disaster—indeed, the fruits of these years are the disasters that were visited on the society during the second half of the 1980s. It is now clear that problems denied are problems made worse.

It should be remembered while reading the chapters that follow that we have deliberately concentrated on those social problems that are common

to industrial societies, in fact, present in some form in every industrial nation, although the extent of the problems differs from society to society. The purpose of this choice was to encourage the reader to see the Soviet Union from a perspective not usually taken. In the past, it was the political differences between the "West" and the "East" that were given most attention, with the result that common features were missed or given little attention. And yet, as we can now see, it was precisely what we had in common, namely, the industrialization and urbanization of the society, that has led to the present state of affairs. As has recently been argued by Moshe Lewin, it was the maturation of an industrial society that made *perestroika* both necessary and possible.⁴ This is not to deny (and the chapters in this volume show it very clearly) that the Soviet regime has put its own stamp on the form that these problems have taken, but rather to suggest that the nature of the changes currently taking place cannot be understood unless we see the USSR as a member of the species "industrial society."

Notes

1. Aaron Trehub, "Down and Out in Moscow and Murmansk: Homelessness in the Soviet Union," *Radio Liberty Report*, March 14, 1988.

2. See *Pravda*, June 29, June 30, July 1, and July 2, 1988.

3. See Zhores Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1990), and David Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

4. Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Politics and Social Problems

Paul Hollander

The Party is engaged in a titanic effort to eliminate phenomena alien to socialism.

—T. I. Zaslavskaja¹

Western Views of Soviet Social Problems

Western discussions of Soviet social problems and their relationship to Soviet political institutions and trends have been influenced by two conditions. One has been the absence, or limitation, of accurate and comprehensive information. As a Western commentator put it, Soviet authorities “can variously publish no information . . . incomplete information, contradictory information, wrong information . . . or, mischievously correct information.”² This difficulty has, over the years, considerably diminished: There is now more information and more reliable information available as the authorities have increased their willingness to allow public ventilation of domestic ills. Still, detailed and fully comprehensive statistics on major social pathologies such as homicide, drug addiction, prostitution, or mental illness remain to be made public. At the same time, in the spirit of *glasnost*, the official monopoly on the definition and discussion of social problems has weakened; in fact, their coverage has become a form of social criticism. (Even begging has become mentionable in the news media.³)

The second influence on Western views of Soviet social problems has been wishful thinking about the connections between Soviet domestic problems and the nature of the entire political system, including its foreign policies. The long-standing Western disposition has been (even more so since the rise of Gorbachev) to believe that domestic weaknesses and problems are bound to exert a basically benign influence on the Soviet political system: They cry out for alleviation and put pressure on Soviet leaders to reform their institutions and policies. Socioeconomic problems have been seen as significantly limiting the freedom of political action of Soviet leaders; at some point they would be compelled to turn inward, away from “adventures” abroad and regimentation at home in order to make the system more rational, productive, efficient, and satisfactory to its citizens. The leaders have also been seen as bound to respond, sooner or later, to public demands to improve living standards—indeed, the need for

the modernization of the economy has emerged (or perhaps reemerged) as the most compelling explanation of why far-reaching reforms can no longer be delayed. Such assessments tend to attribute pragmatism to the Soviet leaders and are permeated with skepticism about the importance of ideology.

For many Western commentators, the discrepancy between a highly authoritarian political system—maintaining a huge bureaucracy, fielding vast armed forces, being active abroad, lavishly subsidizing its internal security and espionage services and propaganda apparatus—and a population suffering a great variety of privations, shortages, mismanagement, and assorted social pathologies has been viewed as irrational. The magnitude of social problems cried out for alleviation, even for thoroughgoing structural changes. Gorbachev has greatly encouraged such beliefs and expectations by dwelling on a variety of social problems with unusual candor.

The idea of “social problems” is distinctly modern because by defining anything as a “problem” we mean not only that it is undesirable but also that it is not an immutable condition, that it can be alleviated. As a past president of the American Social Science Research Council put it, “A renewed determination to ameliorate certain long-standing, as well as recently developed, ills of the society has arisen along with a sense of power and confidence in its ability to do so.”⁴

Some recent Soviet discussions echo similar confidence. Whether such optimism is warranted either in the United States or in the Soviet Union is open to question. The fact remains that now, in the second half of the twentieth century, we have more “problems”—both as individuals and societies, in the East and the West—because of our growing intolerance of many deficiencies of social and personal life. For example, poverty used to be a normal condition, whereas today it is a social problem (at any rate in Western societies). Similarly, routinized work, various illnesses, marriages lacking in excitement and intense personal fulfillment, and the underrepresentation of women in various occupational hierarchies used to provide no grounds for public complaint, protest, or scholarly inquiry, but they do so today.

Social problems refer to aspects of social life and group behavior that are perceived as undesirable but remediable. In the Soviet Union they are often called “phenomena alien to socialism.” Needless to say, what is defined as undesirable (alien) reflects prevailing social-political norms and standards, which in the Soviet case have been authoritatively determined by the political decisionmakers and guardians of the official values; the link between social problems, political institutions, and values is unusually clear-cut and explicit under such conditions.

To be sure, social problems often are unintended consequences of various social arrangements and attempts at social-economic reorganization, rather than merely matters of political or moral definitions. The chronic food shortages, demographic imbalances, and overall backwardness of the countryside in the Soviet Union have clearly been the unforeseen and unintended

results of purposeful institutional change, such as the collectivization of agriculture.

Social problems in the Soviet Union can be separated into at least three distinct groups. In the first group, we find what is often referred to as antisocial behavior. This includes all varieties of crime, delinquency, prostitution, and divorce (antisocial in that it interferes with the upbringing of children, thus with social cohesion). Ethnic and racial discrimination, and its consequences, may also be put into this group.

The second group consists of various types of escapist behavior, including alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicide (the ultimate escape). Escapist behavior, too, has antisocial implications, since it disrupts predictable social interaction, the routines of work and family life.

Third, there are various structural-situational conditions that constitute social problems—particularly relevant to the Soviet case and to the relationship between politics and social problems. Such problems have the most direct connection with the political ordering (or disordering) of society. They include the various scarcities, especially of housing and consumer goods (and the corruption they elicit, which merges into criminal conduct); deficiencies in public health; low birthrates (perhaps, from the authorities' point of view, also a form of antisocial behavior); rural underdevelopment or uneven modernization; bureaucratic mismanagement; environmental problems; lack of work satisfaction; and the excessive mobility of labor. Old age is yet another social problem that falls into this group—it is not antisocial to be old, nor does it represent a form of escapism or violate any social norms. It is a problem created by the combination of improvements in public health and the resulting longevity, the changing family structure and social values (which reduced the respect accorded the old), and lack of resources (required to replace services that used to be provided by the extended family).

Social problems in Soviet society have three major sources, two of which can be defined as political. The first has been the general process of modernization, which always disrupts traditional ways of life, worldviews, modes of production, and stable communities. The second has been the self-conscious application of political-ideological criteria to this process and the associated reorganization of society, creating problems peculiar to Marxist-Leninist one-party systems, such as rural backwardness. Third, some social problems have been created by the application of official conceptions of rectitude and the corresponding (broader) definitions of deviance. The official view of the survival of religious attitudes and behavior provides one example of such a "problem." Insofar as emigration and unregulated internal population movements represent a social problem, it too is a direct result of the imposition of political standards on personal lives and choices. What is socially problematic about emigration in Soviet society is to a considerable degree a result of its prohibition or restriction, which creates pent-up frustrations and discontent and possibly magnifies the attraction of all things foreign, or at any rate, Western. However, allowing people to