



Russia

GEOGRAPHY

Russia in Transition

To investigate how the change from communism to capitalism is affecting Russians' everyday lives, a journalist traveled the Trans-Siberian Railroad. As the world's longest railroad line, it is a nearly 6,000 mile journey across the vast interior of Russia. Here is part of what he found.

Traveling across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad is a journey of epic proportions. It is also a good way to judge the mood of the people. . . . While some Russians, particularly in the cities, are adjusting to the new capitalist order, many more, stripped of the security that was a hallmark [characteristic] of the Soviet system, are angry and bewildered.

Experts say at least 6.4 million people are out of work; millions more don't receive salaries for months at a time. Nothing symbolizes the present reality—the need for self-reliance—more than the vegetable gardens I saw from my [railroad car] window. Especially now, a thriving garden often means the difference between a full stomach and a growling one. . . .

Some 2,000 miles out of Moscow. . . . I decided to make Novosibirsk my first stop because it is Siberia's largest city, with 1.4 million people, and the hub of commerce throughout the region. Even a brief visit made it plain that . . . economic reforms have left this city reeling. State orders for military goods and farm machinery have plummeted [fallen], and new production is stymied [prevented] because factories across the nation confront a tangle of unpaid debts.

The giants of the city's military-industrial complex—including the Chkalov Industrial Aviation Factory, which made fighter planes, and SibSelMash, which once produced military vehicles and now turns out farm equipment—have laid off . . . more than half their workforce. Tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs. . . .

One afternoon I struck up a conversation with Yuri M. Maksimov. Now 51, he had put in 13 years as a metal-worker at the nearby Chkalov factory, but he left two years ago after not having been paid for six months. Today he earns 500 rubles a month—about \$85—sweeping up around a cluster of kiosks that sell food and alcohol. “I never used to really think about tomorrow,” Maksimov said. “But if they had told me back then that I, with my good hands and experience, would be sweeping courtyards in the future, I never would have believed them. I felt I was necessary to the government. Now, no one needs me.” . . .

Tossed out of their jobs, or only occasionally receiving salaries, many Siberians have become street—or “shuttle”—traders, buying cheap Chinese, Turkish, and Polish goods in big cities and selling them in their hometowns. . . . [At the train station] I approached three middle-aged women resting on multicolored sacks the size of steamer trunks. Shuttle

traders from Irkutsk, they come to Novosibirsk once a month to buy Chinese goods at the *barakholka*, a bustling dirty wholesale market on the edge of town. There they load up with \$7.50 blouses, 70-cent socks, \$12 jogging shoes, and \$4 rip-off Fila and Reebok shirts, which they haul to Irkutsk to sell for a small profit. On each trip they spend a total of 72 hours in third-class train compartments and about 12 hours in Novosibirsk, returning to Irkutsk like exhausted pack animals.

"I am forced to do this," said Nina Pushkareva, who quit her low-paying teaching job and began shuttle trading a year and a half ago. Her husband, a factory worker, is paid irregularly, and with prices for food, gasoline, and consumer goods approaching U.S. levels but salaries lagging ten times behind, this seemed the only way to help her family of four get by.

"At first it was embarrassing and unpleasant," Pushkareva said of the transition [change]. "Now everyone accepts it. . . . I really can't say I live better or worse than before—I just have to work a lot more." Then, reflecting a common belief that people's attitudes have changed too much to return to communism, she added, "One thing I do know: Whether we like it or not, we can never go back to the old system."

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why is unemployment so high in Novosibirsk? For what two reasons are even people who still have jobs not necessarily well off?

2. What about communism might now seem attractive to the Russian people? According to the reading, is it likely that Russia will return to communism? Explain why or why not.

Activity

Create a poem or a rap about life in Russia, based on the title "The Price of Freedom."