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The Problems of Social Well-being of the West Siberian in the 1950s

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Abstract

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This article analyses the material provision and well-being of Russian urban population in the 1950s. The key issues for that time were identified. The overall level of income of the population remained relatively low. People couldn't meet their growing requirements. Lack of housing made this issue paramount. The article refers to the undeveloped infrastructure of Soviet cities, low income and lack of sufficient personal belongings. Special attention in the article is paid to the analysis of subjective experience on the evaluation of well-being. Debunking of Stalin's personality cult stimulated the growth of utilitarianism and pragmatism. The interest of the population to the problems of material well-being was one hundred percent. The changes under the influence of the Twentieth Party Congress, contributed to the transformation of the social consciousness and the whole complex of cultural formation in general. The emergence of new social attitudes, which require different approaches to their implementation, resulted in rethinking of the negative facts of social life, which were previously perceived as neutral but now, under conditions of growth of critical sentiments, began to seem unacceptable. It intensified discontent. The bulk of the population continued to look to the future, being content with little.

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1. Introduction

Many studies, both domestic and foreign researchers devoted to the problem of the lifelong well-being in the USSR (McAuley, 1979; Bukin, & Isaev 2008, 2009). Issues of everyday life, interpersonal relationships and social well-being have always been important in human life. Hence the need to address the problems of social and living conditions of the population in the recent past, to living



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standards that define almost every minute of human activity, included in the circulation of personal domestic problems to be solved throughout his life.

2. The income level of the population and the problems of supply of basic necessities

The overall level of income of the population in the cities of Western Siberia, as well as throughout Russia remained relatively low. People couldn't meet their growing requirements. Surveys of working families' budgets, conducted during the Soviet years, in comparison with the index of prices, including market prices for basic goods show that the consumption scale in the 1950s mismatched established physiological norms (Alexeev, & Bukin, 1980; Bukin, 1984).

In the early 1950s there were not enough goods in the shops. However, queues still remained. But citizens were little upset over it; they perceived the situation as an echo of the war years. Over time, approximately 3 years later, people began facing food shortages, although in some places they had been observed in the past. This was the main factor of growing social tension, which started to increase soon after Stalin's death, when the concept of "deficit" has firmly entered into the everyday life in the cities. First of all, there were no meat, butter, sausage, bakery and confectionery products. If, on the occasion of an event of price reduction, the election or, for example, on Khrushchev's arrival in Novosibirsk in 1954, these products appear in stores, but during the first two hours, they were usually sold out. In the USSR in the mid-1950s demand for consumer goods was estimated to satisfy only 40-50% of the needs (Grigoryeva, 2003).

In 1957 funds for Siberian regions were significantly reduced for oil, fat, fish, footwear, textiles, electrical appliances, etc. Especially unfavourable situation was in the Kemerovo region. In 1956, funds for the soap for Kuzbass were decreased compared to 1952 by 40% (Konovalov, 2004).

Evaluation of standard of living is largely determined by the individual's self-sentiment. A large number of complaints about the poor condition of supply were an important indication of the low level of social well-being of the individual. People not only filed complaints to various authorities, gave mandates to the deputies, but also wrote their wishes on the ballot during the elections. They hoped that the government would see their demands and solve all problems. Cry of desperation sounds in the letter of the resident of Tomsk, a member of the VKP (b) M. Emelyanchuk: "Give us meat, milk and butter, eggs give us...Everything is just on the top, for your banquets, while people are starved to death in thousands from a "prosperous" life... No one sees the life, always cares from morning till night; there is nothing to eat, nothing to put on, there is no firewood, coal, everything costs money..." (A copy of the anonymous letter to Stalin, 1950). 2 years later, when the MGB agencies identified her, she was arrested.

In remote areas the supply situation was even worse, which increased the feeling of irritation and discontent. Mostly, people required to improve the work of workers' supply departments serving the persons employed in remote production areas where there were no shops, to increase the sales of sugar, butter, sausage, waged a resolute struggle against the sale of these items by pulling strings (A copy of the letter to Khrushchev, 1954). Overview of the letters received by the newspaper "Soviet Siberia" in 1954, gives basically the same picture (Letters to the newspaper " Soviet Siberia", 1954). This was largely caused by the low growth of trading organizations. Whereas by 1955 the absolute volume of

trade had increased by somewhat less than 189 percent over that of 1940, the number of retail and restaurant outlets had increased by only 20 percent (Narodnoe hozyaystvo SSSR v 1956 g.: Statisticheskii sbornik, 1956). Typically, people required not so much food as to regain order in trading organizations, as they were sure that when business was organized on a reasonable basis, the amount of goods that was available in the country would be enough.

As the deficit expanded the practice of buying non-food items from private individuals, speculators, who had access to scarce goods and resold them at a higher prices. In 1959, operating costs for purchases from private traders accounted for 20% of total expenditure for the purchase of industrial goods. Overpayment averaged 45-50% (Kazantsev, 1993). People were extremely dissatisfied with speculation. This caused the angry indignation of the people, who demanded to put an end to it.

Some social groups lived relatively well. Production Manager, leaders of the city and the region, highly qualified scientists had a high income (up to 30 thousand rubles per month), and could provide themselves and their families with comfortable existence. To this we must add the great benefits provided by the nomenclature, the presence of closed shops, which carried out trade of goods in very short supply. Closed shops appeared under Stalin, but widespread after his death. Size of allowance of regional party elite increased (Kalinina, 2015). This allowance was called "wage in envelopes". At the same time enormous mass of the population had a very low income. In 1955 in the USSR 42.6% of all workers and employees, or 18.5 million people received wages less than 500 rubles, this was below the monthly average in the country. By 1958 this had fallen to 35% (Ivanova, 2014). It is remarkable that the problem income growth was not considered a priority. These results were shown by three quarters of respondents. The interest of the population to the problems of material well-being at the same time was one hundred percent (Grushin, 2001).

With great enthusiasm was encountered the annual decline in prices, although the pre-war level of prices had not dropped. The joy of satisfaction was determined not only by the absolute as comparative figures. The feeling of continual improvement of the life of well-being inspired people. In those days, all the shops were overcrowded. However, there was some skepticism. Some people expressed doubts, saying that in one or two weeks in stores will not be goods. Someone complained that prices were little lowered (References of the district committees VKP(b) of the Novosibirsk region, 1950).

3. The lack of housing and social facilities

In the first half of the 1950s one of the most pressing issues of housing remained a problem. A significant number of people lived in the barracks, in barns, basements, and attics. On Pikovsky logging sites in the Tomsk region, people lived in the streets. The barracks were occupied by several families who had been fenced off from each other by a single sheet. Many homes were not electrified, people faced water shortages.

A huge portion of the population lived in the dorms. Their condition was often far from health standards. In Soviet times, historians glamorized the situation with the dormitories: "The rooms have always been clean and warm. There was a kitchen, dining room, storage room, drying room for clothes and shoes, a library, a red corner, board games and billiards" (Bukin, 1984). Such exemplary dorms really were, but not all. People tried to keep their accommodation clean, when it was possible, as for

domestic and cultural conveniences, only a few could boast of it. In Tomsk 7-8 people lived in a room, and sometimes even 15-20 people. This number reached 30-35 people in some student dormitories. At Tomsk University, some young research workers lived in the one room with the students, dormitories' commandants often had to lodge apart even the spouses (Reference about the work of higher education institutions, 1957).

The situation was much worse in workers' dormitories. People washed and dried laundry, cooked food and kept firewood in their rooms. Inspections repeatedly fixed the absence of water, cold. Sometimes linens hadn't been changed for 40 days. There were enough beds and some workers were forced to sleep on the floor. Often 3-5 people lived in 2-3 square meters room (References of the district committees VKP(b) about the cultural and consumer services of the working people, 1951). However, the workers, aimed at forest areas for organized recruitment were in the worst situation. In Molchanovsky, Pyshkina-Troitsky and workers of several other logging enterprises of Tomsk region slept on bunk solid planks, and men and women were placed together. There were no washbasins, no baths and no drinking water. People did not wash for months (Reports at the V plenum of the Tomsk Regional Committee of the VKP(b), 1950). All this made people file complaints with various authorities, but that did not help. The public opinion polls conducted in the USSR showed that the question, "What problem do you think a priority?" was responded by the vast majority of citizens as "Housing construction" (Grushin, 2001).

Despite the deployment of the country's construction program, a large portion of the population remained without decent housing. According to the official data for December 1956 in Novosibirsk, on the average 3.9 square meters of living space were accounted per capita. A significant number of houses were consisted of loose-fill-frame barracks. Many of them were located on the foreshore of the river Ob in the ravine areas and small rivers and were extremely shabby (Minutes of the meeting of XV party conference of the Central District of Novosibirsk, 1956). Newly built houses were without modern conveniences. Especially unfavorable situation was in the workers' settlements. For example, even the most basic conditions in the settlement for workers of Novosibirsk Shipyard were not created. There was no water, baths and bakery (Information Novosibirsk regional prosecutor's office on issues prosecution and investigative work, 1953). Infrastructure in Siberian cities and settlements was a quite pathetic picture. Panorama of the Siberian cities is shown with a full range of quantitative data in the monograph of N. Kuksanova (Kuksanova, 1993).

The question of health and public services was of a key importance. It constituted the main part of everyday life of the citizens. There were not enough schools, kindergartens and hospitals. M. Zlobina, who worked on the construction of the Novosibirsk hydroelectric power station, told, that going to work, she locked her 4-year-old son, because the child was not taken to the kindergarten because of to lack of space. Once, when the mother was at work, the child was on the verge of setting fire to the house and suffocating by fume (Information Novosibirsk regional prosecutor's office on issues prosecution and investigative work, 1953). The worst situation was in the Kemerovo region. This region lacked doctors and teachers. At 10 thousand populations in Kuzbass in 1957 it accounted for only 9 doctors, which is about 2 times less than the average for Russia. And this in a region with a population of 1950 to 1956 increased by 600 thousand people (Konovalov, 2004).

Siberian town, even regional centers were poorly constructed. Many roads, even in Novosibirsk, with a population of 731 thousand people in 1956 (The national economy of the USSR in 1956. Statistical Yearbook, 1956), were not asphalted. The operation of passenger transport was not effectively organized. The workers of plants and factories suffered from this in the first place. In the 1950s small Siberian towns lacked bus service despite the presence of plants, situated far from the dwelling. This forced the workers to get to work on foot sometimes several kilometers.

Absolutely an absurd situation was in Novosibirsk. The city had two different time zones, and the river divided into two parts, between which a normal message couldn't be established for a long time. The bridge, connecting the two banks (the right and the left bank) of the city was opened only at the end of 1955. Until that moment communication took the form of a pontoon bridge, which periodically for a long time, move apart, to allow ships to pass. As a result, transport was forced to stand for hours on the beach, waiting for the resumption of movement.

4. Lack of material goods

Total low level of material goods affected well-being ordinary citizens. According to the results of inspection of worker dormitories in Novosibirsk conducted in 1951, young single works had no personal belongings. Their entire wardrobe was on them. Finnish journalists, who visited the USSR in 1954, noted that the Soviet people looked very unpresentable. "Soviet fashion women are way behind the times". Black quilted jackets, which were designed for both men and women, made the Soviet streets look bleak (Ivanova, 2014).

In dorms people didn't even have hangers; they had to use backrests of the beds instead. Sometimes there were no door-locks. Lack of material goods, essential household appliances, the lack of a sufficient number of utensils in canteens, water, light, numerous shortcomings objectively contributed to the negative sentiment. "Twice I found nails and screws in white bread, and once I found baked rag", complained Markova, resident of Novosibirsk (Markova, 1950).

Poor food in canteens resulted in emergence and growth of student communes in 1950s (Information of the Tomsk city executive committee on household services of the students of high schools, 1957). Each member of the Commune brought 200 rubles for the purchase of products that are produced alternately. Foods for a commune are usually prepared by the cleaners, who got paid 25 rubles per month from each student.

Complaints in the field of employment deserved particular attention. Grievances mainly came from unskilled workers in industries with special conditions of production organization: construction, forest industry (Logging). The complaint made by O. Grigoryeva from Novosibirsk, who worked on the construction of the UNR-805, said, "The chief is rude, foremen are young and also rude. When I come to the office no one wants to answer any questions. When the winter came nothing was prepared. Barracks are not equipped, the walls and ceiling are empty. There's so cold in the room even water freezes. No light, no water, no baths, no stores; workers have to walk 6 km to get a bread. There's no work. Every morning I come and look for an opportunity to work. Earnings are quite low, 120-150 rubles per month. But now, because of cold and snowstorm, I can't obtain even that" (Grigoryeva, 1953).

5. The transformation of social consciousness and growing dissatisfaction

The changes under the influence of the Twentieth Party Congress, contributed to the transformation of the social consciousness and the whole complex of cultural formation in general. In the process of formation of the new structures of social interaction, society faced a number of contradictions, based on the divergence of the former habitual beliefs and specific actions, based on the actualization of rational motives of actions. The emergence of new social attitudes, which require different approaches to their implementation, resulted in rethinking of the negative facts of social life which were previously perceived as neutral but now, under conditions of growth of critical sentiments, began to seem unacceptable.

One of the reasons of rancor of worker was revived feeling of humiliation and helplessness after 20th Congress of the Communist Party. There was a strong feeling that the world is unfair. As said one worker from Efremov Factory in Novosibirsk: "Officials from district committee don't visit us because they fear to soil their clean suits". Directors were designated just as "Kulaks". Many people complained that ordinary worker can't find the truth anywhere (Kamashko, 1957). Egalitarian sentiments were strong. For instance, worker Yurinskii offered to deprive directors "extra" rooms and distribute them among workers (Yurinskii, 1957).

Daily living disorder, frequent water shortages caused general discontent. However, growth of dissatisfaction had several reasons. Denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality in 1956 generated ideological and psychological crisis of mass mind. People step-by-step deviated from idealized views, faith in party and supreme justice has weakened. That stimulated strengthening of utilitarianism and growth of consumer orientations. Carrying out a social policy, granting the people private apartments, pension increases, shortening work hours before the weekend only increased needs of people and it became more difficult to meet them.

Undermining of the ideological principles of society forced the government transform money into a major incentive. Workers worked worse when they didn't see any financial incentives. Labor turnover began increasing in 1956-1957. The major cause was dissatisfaction with the amount of wages (Experience in economic and sociological research in Siberia, 1966).

The destruction of the faith, which was the main factor of labor activity, contributed to the formation of interests aimed at the financial enrichment and personal well-being. Therefore, in speeches at meetings, complaints, orders of voters, the inscriptions on the ballot papers people have raised questions mainly material incentives. Party bodies noticed this trend in 1957. At the IV Plenum of the Tomsk Regional Party Committee it was said: "Don't we have too many requirements of material goods? Don't we have too many complaints about the difficulties which we had enough before?" (Kuz'michev, 1957).

Growth of utilitarianism has generated as yet tentative steps toward market as the regulator of economic relations. In autumn 1956 owing to shortage of some products, especially white bread, one of the workers metallurgic plants in Novosibirsk stated: "If we decreased fund of the blanks, we would increase supply of bread on the kolkhoz market and we wouldn't need so much bread for selling" (Information on the nature of questions and individual speeches at party conferences, working assembly, meetings and individual conversations, 1956). However, the majority was as before tending

to rely on the government regulation. People listening to Khrushchev in Novosibirsk, who had promised to solve issue with food, blamed local government and expected taking specific steps (Information on the nature of questions and individual speeches at party conferences, working assembly, meetings and individual conversations, 1956).

6. The growth of well-being and subjective assessments

Numerous Studien in this field indicate that standard of well-being in 1950-s notably increased. The wages increased. By 1961 incomes on average increased 1.3 times compared with 1950 and taking into account facilities and payoffs from social funds 1.35 times (Grigoryeva, 2003). The scale of housing construction has increased, thousands of people have moved from barracks to the small apartments. In 1956 the pensions also increased. In 1957 was raised non-taxable minimum wages of workers and employees from 26 rubles to 37 rubles per month. In 1958 taxes on bachelors, single and small families were abolished. By 1959, annual retail sales doubled the sales volume in 1952 (Goldman, 1960). However, consumption growth only increased demands of the Soviet citizens. They needed not only apartments, but also good furniture, not only the suits, but also elegant shoes, then tape recorders, TV sets. About cars people haven't dreamed yet in 1950-s.

This trend only was outlined in society. The vast majority demonstrated a very low level of needs. Public opinion polls have recorded the following answers to the question "What has been a change to your standard of living?" - "The family began to eat better"; "The products and goods appeared in the shops". All this suggests that the summit of the Soviet man desire is to be well fed, shod, clothed and have a roof over the head (Grushin, 2001).

Brandeis University Professor of Economics (USA) Elizabeth Brainerd, using new and alternative sources of well-being, writes, "Both Western and Soviet estimates of GNP growth in the Soviet Union indicate that GNP per capita grew in every decade in the postwar era, at times far surpassing the growth rates of the developed Western economies" (Brainerd, 2010). However, even with rapid growth the absolute level of household consumption remained well below that of the United States. Brainerd draws a picture of a society far behind other developed countries in the health status of its population. The physical growth record of the Soviet population in the twentieth century remains impressive, in her opinion, particularly because it occurred across all regions of the Soviet Union, including the less developed republics of Central Asia. "The conventional measures of GNP growth and household consumption indicate a long, uninterrupted upward climb in the Soviet standard of living from 1928 to 1985; even Western estimates of these measures support this view, albeit at a slower rate of growth than the Soviet measures" (Brainerd, 2010).

The proportion of poor industrial workers (per capita income up to 25 rubles a month) was reduced from 7% in 1953 to 1% at the beginning of the 1960s (Kazantsev, 1993). However, the wage gap between workers and white-collar worker also was narrowed. The salaries of highly qualified personnel were almost equal to salary of low-skill workers. As a result, engineers earned less than workers. The remuneration of scientists has decreased.

Assessment of standard of well-being Soviet citizens should be carried out on the basis of both objective and subjective criteria. It is important to take into account the human sense of self. Does he

think of himself as a prosperous, is he pleased with his quality of life? Newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and its "Public Opinion Institute" dedicated their studies to answering these questions in 1960 (Grushin, 2001). Given all drawbacks of these surveys, they provide material facts. According to the "Institute" subjective feeling of improvement of living standards was noted in 73.2% of respondents; 19.8% said that it remained unchanged; 7% dropped (Grushin, 2001). Most of the improvements of living standards tied to the growth of wages and improvement in supply (Grushin, 2001). Persons, who noted a decrease in the standard of living, told primarily about losing all sorts of benefits, salary increments and reduced wages (Grushin, 2001). In general, the feeling of improvement of living conditions was common and widespread. In the questionnaires people expressed enthusiasm and optimism about the future. It seemed that everything was going to change for the better and all difficulties were temporary by their nature. "You ask about the quality of life, and mean by that a material basis. Food, clothing, housing are the foundation of our physical well-being. We are forced to think about it, but we are forced. There will be time - it is not far off - when people will not notice all these problems" (Grushin, 2001).

However, there were many dissatisfied. The reality sometimes does not satisfy workers. On the ballot paper during the election for local councils in Novosibirsk March 3, 1957 someone left message, "Every year wage decreases and decreases. Now we've reached the point when man just can't provide for a family" (Inscriptions negative content on the ballots during the elections to local Soviets, 1957). At the meeting of the Tomsk Regional Party activists noted, "We have a lot of facts, when the workers in the factories, LPH, MTS, in subsidiary companies and constructions earn 100-200 rubles per month" (Speech at the meeting of the Tomsk Regional Party activists, 1956). During the considered period it was extremely small. For that money you could afford only 10 kg of meat or a cotton suit.

There were cases of wage delays. Since the work of enterprises was unevenly in conditions of general planning economy at the end of the month was happening the storming program. For that many factories were forced to maintain the supernumerary staff. At the beginning of the month the workers didn't have enough work for a full day, which led to lower earnings. Moreover, during that period the job rates were under the systematic reduction. Revision of standards, as a rule, was not due to mechanization and automation of production, but reducing the salaries of workers and strengthening the labor intensity. It caused worker's outcries and exerted negative impact on labor productivity. In Novosibirsk at tire-repair plant workers were on the brink of strike. At the Tomsk Electromechanical Plant Worker Konev said, "The slogan of "increase productivity by 12%" means that soon they will reduce rates by 12%" (Konev, 1957).

Even those groups, whose welfare has grown in the 1950s, were often disaffected with their situation, considering Stalin's years more satisfied. This assessment has been associated not only with the growth of utilitarianism and the formation of consumer attitudes. Formerly there was an opportunity to work overtime and obtain solid reward. When there was a work many workers refused to take a break and worked overtime to make more money. Now this has become senseless since overtime led to increasing in job rates. Emerged troubles in supplies of bread, meat and other goods also generated feelings of growing unhappiness.

Important sources for identifying the social needs were mandates from electorate to its representative. Judging by the mandates, to feel comfortable people didn't need too much. They wanted to live in places equipped with necessary facilities, have landscaped streets, clean sidewalks, asphalted roads with public transport. In the countryside people dreamed about clubs, hospitals, schools, electricity. There were a lot of requirements to open bath-house. Separately, people raised the issue of trade. Many townspeople were disaffected with practice to keep in homes, including the main streets, pigs and chickens which created unpleasant odors.

7. Conclusion

Thus, in 1950-s the problem of providing social well-being has not been fully resolved. This was caused by insufficient number of material goods available for the municipal authorities, as well as the country's overall economic weakness. The growth of utilitarianism in the second half of the 1950s only increased the sense of dissatisfaction with life. This problem has led to a significant public interest toward the social and cultural equipping towns and townships, and practical day-to-day aspects became the biggest problem for people. However, in general, psychological condition and public sentiments remained positive. Vast majority was satisfied with their lives. Colombian writer Márquez, who visited the Soviet Union in 1957, has called Soviet people healthy good-natured crowd of old and poorly stitched clothes and bad shoes. "They are not in a hurry and do not fuss and it seem that all their time they spend to live".

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