

No Meat, No Soap—And Now, a Crime Wave

By DMITRI N. SHALIN

When the Ministry of Internal Affairs released the first detailed data on crime in the Soviet Union last February, the figures confirmed what many had suspected for some time: Crime is on the rise. As citizens clamored for action, the ministry promised extraordinary measures to fight the crime wave. It has kept its promise but nevertheless failed to stem the tide.

Indeed, 1989 may turn out to be the worst year in Soviet criminal history (not counting political purges), despite such highly publicized actions as the setting up of anti-crime committees, the assembling of special KGB teams and the mobilizing of citizen patrols. In the first 10 months of the year, crime went up in every major category compared with the same period of 1988: rape 25%, homicide and attempted homicide 28.4%, racketeering 32%, aggravated battery 42.4%, robbery 99%, motor vehicle theft 158%.

Several new developments raise particular concern, none more so than violence in public places. Much violent crime occurs in streets, parks and playgrounds, sometimes in broad daylight with passersby looking the other way. Violence is often motivated by no other reason than the desire to humiliate and cause bodily harm. A series last fall in the newspaper *Sovetskaia Kultura* created a stir in Moscow with its graphic depiction of sadistic crimes committed in the nation's capital.

Racketeering is another relatively new phenomenon. As cooperative and private enterprises have mushroomed, so has organized crime. Soviet papers are full of stories about kidnapping, extortion, money laundering, dealing in counterfeit currency and the like. Now that travel regulations have been relaxed, organized crime in the Soviet Union is forging ties to the West, most notably the U.S. and Israel.

A growing problem is crime against foreigners. More than 2,000 visitors were vic-

timized in Moscow during the first six months of 1989. One common scam involves a taxi driver picking up tourists, with his buddies following in another car and staging a hold-up in a back street. Gary Basmadzhanian, a French art collector visiting Moscow at the invitation of Culture Ministry, vanished from a Moscow hotel last July. Kidnapping was at first suspected, but now murder is feared. Mindful of the effect such incidents could have on tourist industry, the authorities have announced stepped-up police patrols around spots favored by visitors.

One more unwelcome portent is the growing backlog of unsolved cases. According to *Izvestia*, 35% of all criminal cases registered in 1989 have been closed, at least temporarily, due to the "lack of viable clues." While crime rates went up, the number of arraignments and indictments fell precipitously, and so did the prison sentences handed down by the courts. The prison population in the Soviet Union dropped from 1.5 million in 1986 to about 800,000 at present.

Ironically, it is *glasnost* that is in part to blame for the disquiet crime creates among the population. The number of homicide cases projected for 1989—about 19,000—just about equals the number for 1979, a year that produced no public outcry. Now that crime statistics are published in every paper, the public realizes the problem's true extent and feels vulnerable.

The crime wave has affected mostly urban areas, with the bulk of felonies (73.7%) reported in major cities, where residence has always been restricted. These are the crimes that used to be cause to revoke an offender's residence permit, forcing the most dangerous criminals to settle elsewhere. Now that residence laws are less vigorously enforced, many criminals are finding their way back to the cities.

Behind the statistics one can discern a return to the old patterns of alcohol con-

sumption. Violent crime dropped between 1986 and 1987, at the peak of the anti-drinking campaign, but it shot up in the following years, when the restrictions on alcohol sales were lifted. In the first 10 months of 1989, the crime rates went up 34%, while alcohol sales increased 28%.

Special mention must go to the sorry state of law enforcement. According to *Izvestia*, the nation's average annual expenditure on police is about eight rubles per citizen, compared with about \$100 in the U.S. A Soviet law enforcement officer earns an average of 160 rubles a month, 74 rubles below the average national salary.

Finally, the economic reforms may well have aggravated the situation. Sociologists know that during transition periods, when old norms have shaken off and new ones haven't yet taken hold, deviant behavior tends to increase. Ill-defined and ever-changing laws haven't helped, nor have the chronic shortages of food and other basic items.

As long as the country remains in the throes of a painful economic transformation, crime rates probably will remain high. Still, there is much that can be done—investing in law enforcement, streamlining the law, setting up a peer jury system, reinforcing the statute that makes alcohol intoxication an aggravating factor in crime, and above all, pushing through economic reforms. These measures will not turn things around over night, but they will reassure the public and undermine the argument that the country is out of control.

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