

The Passenger Car in the U.S.S.R.

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•THIS is a brief and non-technical account of the way the Soviet regime is trying to deal with the passenger automobile. It makes an interesting story, illustrating the well-known law which says that "everything is more complicated than most people think."¹ As we know from American experience, automobiles have created some extremely complicated problems for modern society. The people of Western Europe and Japan are now running into their own versions of these problems. The U.S.S.R. is at an earlier stage, but now confronts some of the same opportunities and difficulties. How will the Russians meet them?

A key to the Soviet approach lies in the Bolshevik belief that the capitalist, free-market response to the automobile has been unscientific, even irrational. Party theoreticians argue that the U.S.S.R. can develop rational solutions that will be less wasteful, better coordinated, and more equitable than what has evolved in Western capitalist countries. Clearly Soviet success in these efforts would have important implications all over the world. Are there signs of progress to date? What follows is a sketch designed to provide perspective for informed speculation on the outcome of what can be visualized as a contest between the passenger automobile and the Soviet regime. I begin historically.

Four and a half years ago, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev toured the United States. You remember that he visited San Francisco and was put in the Mark Hopkins Hotel. The morning he left, Mayor Christopher escorted him to the airport by way of the great, handsome San Francisco freeway. They were bucking the incoming morning rush-hour traffic. Khrushchev apparently watched the stream of individual cars go by, with generally one passenger per car, and finally exclaimed that it was irrational. Mayor Christopher evidently conceded diplomatically that large numbers of private cars had indeed created traffic problems in our big cities. The experience seems to have made a profound impression on Khrushchev.

Shortly thereafter, when Khrushchev stopped in Vladivostok after a conference in Peking, he said, "America really does have a lot of cars." He then went on, "It is not our aim, however, to compete with the Americans in the production of large numbers of automobiles. . . . We will turn out a lot of cars, but not now. We want to establish a system for the use of automobiles that will differ from the one in capitalist countries. . . ." ² It turned out that what Khrushchev had in mind was a kind of municipal rent-a-car service, under which each city would have a fleet of automobiles its citizens could rent for vacation or weekend trips. Since 1959, such a system has actually begun.

But this is only part of the picture. How do these miniature municipal car fleets fit into the overall structure of passenger transportation? How many automobiles are there, and what is their role? Let me take a minute or two to fill in the background for you. With this perspective, we can then return to the specific problems surrounding the use of the passenger automobile.

First, you should know that, as of January 1, 1965, the total stock of passenger automobiles in the U.S.S.R. is just over one million units. This compares with about 75 million in the United States, about 8 million each in France, the United Kingdom, and West Germany, about 6 million in Canada and about 4 million in Italy. In the

¹Cited in Charles P. Kindleberger, *Economic Development*, McGraw-Hill, 1958, p. 16.

²*Pravda*, October 8, 1959, p. 1. Translated in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (cited hereafter as CDSP), Vol. XI, No. 40, p. 3.

United States, there is now better than one car for every three people. The ratio of total automobile registrations to total population in France is about one to seven, in the United Kingdom about one to eight, and in West Germany, about one to nine. In the U. S. S. R. there is one passenger automobile for roughly every 230 people.³ Moreover, since perhaps half of the Soviet passenger cars are operated by state agencies rather than private citizens, the number under individual control in the U. S. S. R. is something like one for each 500 persons.

In this respect, therefore, the difference between American and Soviet Society is not of the order of ten to one, but something over one hundred to one. It requires a drastic wrench of the understanding to appreciate the contrast. I can vouch for the fact that a casual Western visitor to the U. S. S. R. is unlikely to appreciate the magnitude of this disparity. In Moscow and other cities on the Intourist circuit, one rides in cars and sees lots of cars on the streets. Somehow their relative scarcity is not made vivid, though one does notice that they are outnumbered by trucks. Presumably in the vast stretches of the hinterland, and in smaller cities and towns seldom visited by Westerners, the paucity of passenger automobiles would be more apparent.

The present nationwide stock of about one million passenger automobiles is not growing rapidly. Annual production is around 175,000 units, of which some thirty-five or forty thousand are exported, primarily to East European countries. Taking account of normal depreciation, net additions to the national stock are currently in the neighborhood of 60,000 units a year. Compared with what is going on in Western Europe and Japan, to say nothing of North America, this is an exceedingly modest level of growth. The U. S. S. R., as the second industrial power of the world, is obviously pursuing a radically restrictive policy toward the passenger automobile.

How do people get around? Tables 1 and 2 give the picture for 1962. In urban areas, more than 40 percent of the passenger travel is by motor bus. Another 40 percent is by old-fashioned streetcar or by modern trolleybus. Suburban rail lines account for about 7 percent of the passengers carried and about 10 percent of the passenger-miles, since the average rail trip is longer than that of the strictly urban carriers. The subways in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev add 4 or 5 percent to the national total and are of course responsible for a substantial fraction of urban passenger traffic in these three major cities. The data in Table 1 do not cover taxi service, available in many cities, or such movement by individual automobile as takes place. Except for those who live close to their jobs, the typical Soviet urban citizen rides to work, but in a public conveyance. The carriers give service which impresses American visitors and appears to match what is available in Western Europe. The subways are showcases; bus and trolley routes are widespread; frequency of service is admirable. True, buses and cars are often very crowded, but this makes for operating efficiency.

Travel between cities is still dominated by the railroads, as is clear from the figures in Table 2. Intercity autobus traffic accounts for about 12 percent of total passenger-kilometers, supplementing rail service among nearby towns and cities. Aircraft already carry over 10 percent of the traffic, mainly on long trips. Together with the railroads, these carriers provide adequate service for the travel considered essential by the authorities. The amount of travel per capita is, however, smaller than in Western Europe, and very much smaller than in North America.

The slender stock of passenger automobiles is supported by an equally underdeveloped supporting base of paved roads, filling stations, and garages. The main streets of cities are paved, but even in Moscow the back streets can be very hard to navigate. Major interregional highways are mainly paved, though year-round maintenance in so northern a territory presents many problems. A *Pravda* story in the fall of 1963 indicated that the total number of filling stations for the entire country was around fifteen or sixteen hundred.⁴ Servicing and repair facilities are even more scarce.

³Data for two years earlier are collected in the United States Department of Commerce, Business and Defense Services Administration, Transportation Equipment Division, World Motor Vehicle Production and Registration, 1962-1963 (October 1963), pp. 4-5.

⁴CDSF, Vol. XV, No. 36, p. 24.

TABLE 1
URBAN PASSENGER TRANSPORTATION,
U. S. S. R., BY CARRIER, 1962, IN MILLIONS
OF PASSENGERS CARRIED

Carrier	Millions of Passengers Carried	Percentage Share of Total
Autobus	12,634	46.8
Tramway (streetcar)	7,937	29.4
Trolleybus	3,353	12.4
Railroad (commutation)	1,791	6.6
Subway	<u>1,301</u>	<u>4.8</u>
Five-carrier total	27,016	100.0

Source: Tsentralnoe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie,
Narodnoe Khoziaistvo SSSR v 1962 godu
(Moscow, 1963), pp. 385,415,421.

TABLE 2
INTERCITY PASSENGER TRANSPORTATION,
U. S. S. R., BY CARRIER, 1962, IN BILLIONS OF
PASSENGER-KILOMETERS

Carrier	Billions of Passenger- Kilometers	Percentage Share of Total
Railroad (non-commutation)	145.2	74.6
Autobus (intercity)	23.2	11.9
Civil aircraft	20.3	10.4
River	4.6	2.4
Sea	<u>1.3</u>	<u>0.7</u>
Five-carrier total	194.6	100.0

Source: Tsentralnoe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie, Narodnoe
Khoziaistvo SSSR v 1962 godu (Moscow, 1963),
pp. 381,385,416.

The rare possessor of a private automobile therefore faces many frustrations. Garages work under plans which make them reluctant to take on minor servicing jobs, since major overhauls and replacements contribute more effectively to plan fulfillment. Complaints indicate that spare parts are frequently not available. Filling stations sometimes do not have supplies of gasoline, or observe limited hours of business. All of this reflects the low priority assigned by the authorities to the private passenger automobile in the Soviet economy. For example, four years ago in Frunze, a regional capital of 250,000 people, there were fourteen hundred individual cars and fifteen hundred motorcycles, but only a single filling station. Car owners obtained gasoline illegally from truck drivers or through other devious channels.⁵ A few years earlier, in a novel celebrating postwar progress, part of the story involved a happy vacation trip on the newly-paved highway from Moscow south all the way to the Crimea. Dramatic tension was provided intermittently as the vacationers faced a recurring crisis. It was not whether the next motel would have an empty room, with or without swimming pool, but whether the filling station said to be in the next city would have any gas! Gas is gratefully purchased in the U. S. S. R., even without trading stamps.

The current situation, then, may be summed up as follows: the 230 million people of the U. S. S. R. live in a largely industrial society that makes use of only about one million passenger cars, of which less than half are in individual ownership. Most passenger transportation is by public conveyance. There are perhaps seventy-five thousand taxis. Roughly half of the noncommercial passenger cars are owned by government organizations and assigned to leading officials. The remainder have been acquired, at very high prices, by patient citizens with ample cash, willing to keep their names on waiting lists and undergo the paperwork required to demonstrate eligibility, obtain a driver's license, etc. It is interesting to observe the pressures that come into play under these conditions.

For example, there was what we may call the "Krasnoyarsk incident." In this provincial district of Siberia, some enterprising municipal authorities decided in the spring of 1960 to develop rent-a-car services in the major cities of their territory. They did not simply purchase new automobiles. Instead, they sought to round up the passenger cars currently owned by various factories, offices, trusts, and other government institutions. "It was decided, on the basis of a territory executive committee decree, to set up centralized common-carrier units in place of the small separate garages of individual offices, factories and trusts. The intention was to assemble all the cars from the latter and to operate them from two new garages, one holding 150, the other 130 cars. The saving would be substantial. The Moskvich or Volga car that once stood idle in front of a director's office would be able to serve both

⁵Ibid, Vol. XII, No. 16, pp. 24-25.

its former individual owner and also several additional persons entitled to the use of a car in the performance of their duties."⁶ How do you suppose the officials of these organizations reacted? They showed both imagination and initiative. As soon as the order was issued, requests came in to exempt cars as "special vehicles." "On the streets of Krasnoyarsk, Abakan, Norilsk, and other cities, dozens of passenger cars have started to appear with the most diverse emblems and signs, from the blue cross of the veterinary service to a neatly painted line reading 'Culinary Products Delivery.' There were 'mobile emergency repair cars,' 'operational-emergency-technical cars,' and still other special purpose cars." After three months, 107 cars had been turned in, but 166 had obtained exemptions.

What does the "Krasnoyarsk incident" show? Clearly government officials find that the cars assigned to them are convenient and useful for official and personal trips. They are reluctant to turn them in to a municipal pool. The centralized fleet would perhaps make more continuous use of each car, cutting costs, spreading overhead, and eliminating waste and duplication. But the officials who have tasted the delights of a personal car are reluctant to give their cars up.

Another important phenomenon arises under Soviet conditions, reflecting the chronic shortages of various consumer goods and services that have plagued the Soviet economy for many years. The cars that are personally owned by individual Soviet citizens are sometimes used to produce what the regime calls "unearned income." We have it on the authority of the Minister of Internal Affairs of the principal Soviet Republic that, where the state fails to provide adequate supplies of consumer goods and services, private citizens tend to move in to fill the vacuum.⁷ An enterprising individual can use his car, for example, to bring fresh fruit or vegetables to cities where, at uncontrolled prices in collective farm markets, they command a substantial premium over their cost in producing areas. By the canons of Adam Smith, this function of relieving shortages and reducing price discrepancies is an honorable contribution to the general welfare. In the U. S. S. R., however, such activities are considered anti-social, and those who engage in them are termed "parasites," getting "unearned income" from their capitalist activities. Privately-owned automobiles figure prominently in the lurid accounts of the evil doings of such "speculators" when they are brought to trial under the campaign that has now been going on for four years.

Even more modest means of transportation can offend the authorities. In May 1962, *Izvestia* reported the case of a forty-seven year old schoolteacher, in a country district near the Caspian Sea, who gave up school teaching in favor of growing vegetables and fruit. Over seven years he built himself a brick house and planted a large vegetable garden, thirty-two fruit trees, two hundred and thirty-six grape plants, and sixteen hundred tomato plants. He bought a motor and installed a watering system. He built a hothouse. He bought a motorboat to carry the vegetables to a nearby city and beyond. His neighbors "expressed indignation and asked that the machinations of the swindler be looked into. Finally, criminal action was instituted against the inveterate money-chaser. The court decided to exile Stepanov from the province and to confiscate the house, the hothouse, and the motorboat."⁸ In Soviet eyes, the profit-seeking motivation behind such private enterprise is a survival of the past, a selfish, anti-social drive to be cleansed from the soul of the new Soviet man. Where this motivation is present, the private passenger automobile must be seen, from an official point of view, as a dangerous instrument in the hands of parasites.

So far I have tried to sketch briefly the current situation in the U. S. S. R., both as regards the physical presence of passenger automobiles and as regards the attempts of the authorities to control their use. Let me now turn to prospects for the future, through weighing the forces at work.

⁶ *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, April 3, 1960. Translated in CDSP, Vol. XII, No. 14, pp. 24-25.

⁷ V. I. Tikunov in *Izvestia*, April 13, 1962, p. 3. Translated in CDSP, Vol. XIV, No. 15, p. 23.

⁸ *Izvestia*, May 26, 1963, p. 4. Translated in CDSP, Vol. XIV, No. 21, p. 23.

First, we may assume, I think, that a mute underground revolutionary thrust is latent in the desires of the Soviet people. It has even been given oblique expression by a courageous academician who, in criticizing the modest target for 1965 automobile output that was proposed for the seven-year plan in early 1959, suggested that personal mobility was an important component of a high standard of living. It would not be surprising if the Soviet man in the street showed the same weakness for having his own car that has proved so powerful in North America and Western Europe. The automobile enables an individual in a mass society to get away, on his own, from the organized life around him. It permits footloose weekend jaunts with girl friend or family. It facilitates vacation visits to relatives or to scenic wonders. It is a time-saving convenience and it demonstrates one's status. Left to themselves, consumers will put automobile outlays ahead of health, education, and culture, to the distress of academics and planners. Western experience demonstrates conclusively the enormous strength of the urge to acquire a car, if this urge is given free rein.

But remember the views expressed by Khrushchev. In his eyes, that great incoming stream of bloated monsters, carrying commuters, one by one, into downtown chaos, was clearly irrational. Moreover it exemplified the "unorganized" quality of Western society that he has frequently criticized. The Soviet regime hopes to develop a different answer. The automobile would, as we have seen, be available mainly through municipal rent-a-car services, supplying them to the public for vacation and weekend trips. Daily commutation would continue to be by public carrier: bus, subway, trolley, or train. Moreover this government vision of a rational technical solution is backed by an equally important political and psychological vision of what is now called "full communism." Under full communism, as Marx wrote in 1875, "Society will inscribe upon its banners: 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.'" Soviet theorists have recently developed the view that these needs should be interpreted as "the rational needs of a cultured man." Comic books and chewing gum are not cultured, and will therefore not be part of full communism. Senseless proliferation, duplication, ostentation, and selfish display are not rational, so they too will be absent, even when that great day of abundance arrives.

These matters have been carefully considered by Soviet theorists in connection with the new Party program adopted in 1961. It is recognized, for example, that summer cottages, private automobiles, and private truck gardens are still necessary among the incentives that motivate Soviet citizens. Responsible theoreticians caution against premature suppression of these rewards for hard work.

But the future is seen in rosier terms. There will be state parks, state summer resorts, and state-provided vacation facilities that will remove any need for private dachas. Abundant supplies of food will eliminate any need for personal gardens. And similarly, municipal rent-a-car services will meet any personal needs for passenger automobiles. Thus, as one enthusiastic doctor of philosophy argued in September 1960, "when the public forms of satisfying needs, both in terms of quantity and especially of quality of service, reveal their advantages, people will begin voluntarily to give up their dachas. . . . When all the necessary material and spiritual prerequisites are created, there will no longer be an economic necessity for a number of items of personal property (personal dachas, automobiles, personal savings, etc.). The spiritual prerequisites include a comprehensively developed social awareness: a developed sense of collectivism and the disappearance of all traces of a private-property psychology and survivals of egoism and individualism."⁹ That is one vision of the Soviet future.

Meanwhile, survivals of capitalism are still evident. When the Vice-Director of the Academy of Sciences Institute for Complex Transportation Problems twitted me in 1957 about New York City traffic jams, I replied diplomatically (I thought) that Moscow's broad avenues would perhaps permit them to avoid such congestion. "Oh no," he said, cheerfully. "We will soon have traffic jams too!" It almost seems as though national

⁹Ts. Stepanyan in *Oktyabr*, 1960, No. 9, pp. 3-12. Translated in *CDSP*, Vol. XII, No. 42, pp. 19-20.

stature requires traffic jams in one's capital city. This elderly, distinguished academician accompanied me from his building after our interview in order to show me, proudly, his own personal car parked in the street outside. Here was a major analyst of rational transportation showing appreciation of both the international and the individual status conferred by the automobile. Doesn't this suggest the strength of the forces against which the regime is contending?

Since 1957 the growth of truck traffic in Moscow, together with larger numbers of taxis and individual passenger automobiles, has required a number of traffic-relieving projects. A limited-access belt highway around Moscow is now nearing completion. Underpasses and other center-city projects remind a Western visitor of painfully familiar Western attempts to relieve traffic congestion. The Soviet capital appears to be coming slowly under the same pressures that have plagued American, European, and Japanese cities in recent times, but so far there are no signs of fresh Soviet solutions. Instead of competing with the West in finding engineering or city-planning answers to urban traffic problems, Soviet authorities appear to be placing major weight on the drive to suppress the desire for individually-owned passenger automobiles.

In summing up, it may be useful to identify six functions performed by the passenger automobile, and to reflect on ways in which each is likely to be fulfilled in the Soviet setting. First, a car is a time-saver in getting to and from work. The regime can minimize this consideration by providing frequent bus service to within, say, two blocks of every apartment and work place in urban Russia, along with efficient transfer points. Secondly, door-to-door movement by car eliminates the discomforts of winter cold and snow, summer heat and dust, and the rains and mud that mark the intervening seasons. The present generation of Russians is perhaps tougher in accepting these inconveniences than we have become. In any case, these two considerations can perhaps be dealt with through ample routes and service, covered shelters at stops, and a good deal more paving of roads.

The role of Soviet passenger automobiles in relieving food and consumer-goods shortages, as the so-called "parasites" conduct their so-called "private enterprise" operations, could be eliminated if the regime channeled enough resources into consumer-goods production and distribution to meet current demands. The great gains of the past decade in this respect still leave a large gap to be filled, deepened by recent difficulties in agriculture. Shortages mean, therefore, that for at least another decade the regime will see individual cars as potential instruments for flagrantly anti-social behavior; this peculiarly Soviet aspect of the problem will figure heavily in official policies toward automobile use.

Three further functions of the individual passenger automobile, less tangible than the three I have mentioned, also deserve our speculative contemplation. The car as a status symbol is well known in the West; can the new Soviet man be disabused of this motivation? The status aspect of car ownership is the least defensible against official strictures, and perhaps the least worthy of support. We can be sure of the regime's continued efforts to keep this a minor motive, though personal cars will remain a valued prerequisite for officials.

Passenger cars in the West have also provided unchaperoned privacy for boys and girls, or men and women; this function may well have special importance for Soviet urban citizens who still face extremely crowded living conditions. Soviet young people frequently have to defer marriage until they can find a room to share, and married couples generally limit their families because of the housing shortage. More cars would surely mean more lovers' lanes. Under these conditions, my guess is that both the authorities and the general public will give higher priority to building apartments than to supplying cars, at least for another decade.

Finally there is the role of the individual passenger automobile in providing unregulated mobility to its owner. Here the regime faces a profound dilemma. Cars are tremendously efficient in providing low-cost mobility for the infinitely diverse tasks of a modern society. Even if other carriers handle commutation and long-distance traffic, the passenger automobile is needed for a host of other assignments. Hence there is sure to be genuine pressure from all sides in the U. S. S. R. for more and more cars. Clearly, however, it is difficult to confine individuals to officially sanctioned uses of

the automobile. As the stock of automobiles grows, even if cars are mainly corralled in municipal rent-a-car fleets, some Soviet officials are likely to be increasingly distressed at the enhanced power of the individual citizen to pursue his own independent purposes. They may be innocuous rather than sinister. The point is that they are unorganized. Thus one can foresee a silent contest between ideologues visualizing a rational future and citizens thirsting for personal cars.

Our sympathies lie, of course, with the individual. And yet my own hope is that the Russian people and their government will find a way to harness the uncontrolled proliferation of automobiles and highways that has created such difficult problems for wealthy Western nations. These problems are only beginning in the U. S. S. R. Suppression of the automobile, as suggested by party ideologues, is unlikely to be a feasible solution. Khrushchev's successors will probably have occasion to paraphrase Evan's law and observe, ruefully, that "dealing with the passenger automobile is more complicated than Nikita Sergeevich thought!" If the Russians find workable compromises between an automobile-dominated and a state-dominated society, the lessons will be useful all over the world. I'm not sanguine, but I wish them luck.

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