

Collier's

March 15, 1947

p. 23

The Soviet Life Style

by Richard C. Hottelet

"And what about the way we live? My wife and I and our two little boys live in one room. I lost my eldest son in the war. There's no central heating, no hot water. We share a three-room apartment with two other families, and we all cook on the same stove. You ought to hear the fights that go on.

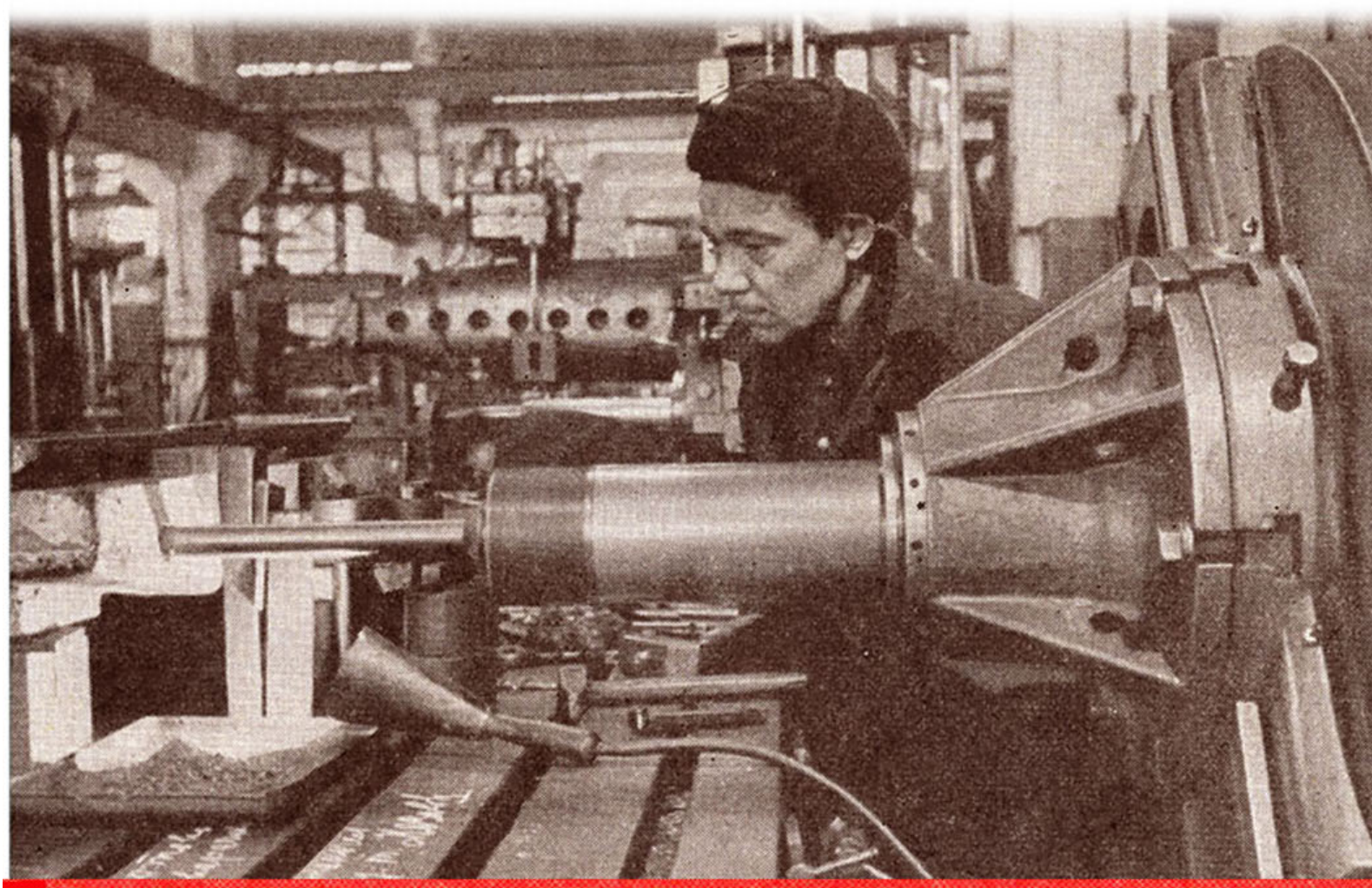
"A couple of panes of our window broke some time ago, and we've stuck cardboard into the frames—it's more important to stay warm, and you don't get much daylight in winter anyway. It's one of those old houses. My job isn't important enough to get into any of the newer ones. This old place has big holes in the stucco, so that the slats show through. It's hard to keep clean, it generates its own dust, and bedbugs keep coming in from next door. Apart from that, our furniture, such as it is, is a mess.

"But we're not badly off. We have an indoor toilet that works, and we have a little shack outside the city that we move to in the summer, and we're luckiest of all because we live in Moscow legally and get the better Moscow rations, and the good concerts and theater."

He looked at me, and I shrugged my shoulders in agreement. He went on, "We were better off before the war, but not as well as we would have been if we hadn't had to build up heavy industry and an army. The Russian people are not a lazy people, but we like the good things of life. And so, when the war was won, most of us looked for a change. First we wanted a little rest and relaxation, then we'd have been ready and eager to roll up our sleeves and build ourselves a good life—*krasivaia zhizn*—build houses and furniture, make clothes and shoes and radios and cars. We thought of the rest of the world as a friend, and wouldn't have minded a chance to do some traveling around in it. I saw Czechoslovakia, Poland, Austria and Hungary during the war. They must be pretty nice in peacetime."

Stalin Makes a Speech

Here he grew somewhat reflective, and quieter, "So we got out of the army, and barely were we out when Stalin made a speech—that election speech in February—and told us that nothing had changed. He told us we were still living in a capitalist world; and that wars are inevitable in the capitalist system, so we'd better be well prepared. And then he flatly put an end to our *krasivaia zhizn* by announcing three more Five Year Plans, maybe even more."



Soviet drive for production uses both force and persuasion. Many workers in Krasny Proletary machine-tool plant received medals for their labor during war

He paused for a moment. "You know what that meant?" I kept quiet. "It meant heavy industry and the railroads would get top priority on everything. It meant we'd have to keep a sizable army and a sizable war industry, because after all you don't talk the way Stalin did if you really believe in international security. And, about the standard of living, that could be raised with what was left—which was very little. . . . Sure, in the long run if we have a powerful heavy industry our standard of living will go up. But how long will it take, and what'll happen to us in the meanwhile?

"Why couldn't we make consumers' goods and slow down the rate of expansion of heavy industry? There's no wild hurry—we could even get some of the machinery from our allies and have a lot less wear and tear on our own people. But now what have we got? Blast furnaces instead of overcoats. Just another rat race like the first three Five Year Plans. Only we're tired now, we've had a hard life. We're not the same people we were in 1927."

With that he stopped and sagged a little, and I ventured, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

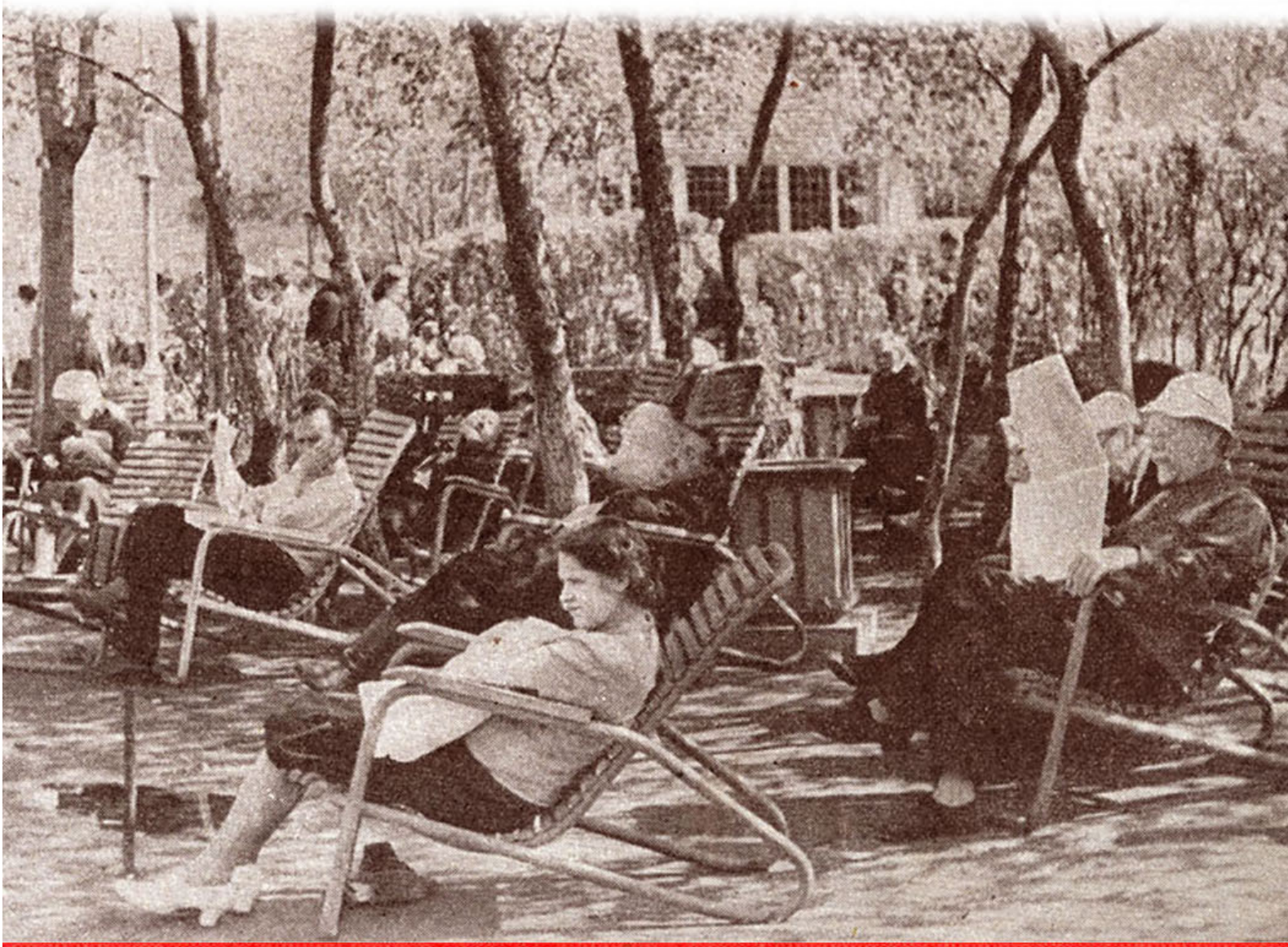
My friend took one of my cigarettes, inhaled, and let the smoke dribble out as he said, "Do? What can we do? Do as we're told, and hope our children have it better." After a moment he recovered somewhat and smiled wryly and murmured, "Nitchevo," as he flicked his ash on my carpet.

Once Stalin gave the word, the government pushed the fourth Five Year Plan with all speed. And, since no one can work miracles, it ran head on into exactly the same problems of reconstruction, distribution, shortages that beset other countries. Only more so.

Reshaping Millions of Lives

The first and greatest problem was people. Seven million additional trained workers had to be found to satisfy the requirements of the plan. And, on top of that, the government had no illusions about the degree to which postwar let-down and the de-

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Another part of the "persuasion" program is establishment of parks and other recreational centers for workers. Above is a section of the Gorky park in Moscow

sire for the *krasivaia zhizn* dampened enthusiasm for more belt tightening. So, through all of 1946 the all-powerful state reached out to its 190,000,000-odd Ivans and began to reshape their lives. For millions it meant being drafted, retrained, transferred, combed out, moved around, frozen in jobs. And while this went on, all the propaganda agencies of the state drummed into their heads that they were happy, optimistic and enthusiastic, prepared to work harder and be content with less.

The largest available man-power pool was the farm population. Farmer Ivan was told to come on to the city and take an industrial job, even if only for the winter. He was being patriotic if he did, and would get good pay.

Traveling through the Donbass last summer, we met the director of a coal mine who told us how this recruiting drive was organized. The regional soviet assigned his coal mine an area containing several villages, in which it was free to recruit labor. No farmer could be prevented from signing up and leaving the village and he was guaranteed various privileges if he did sign up. His family was allowed to stay on the farm and retain its private truck garden and livestock. He was given special tax rebates for the duration of his contract, which was usually a year. If he wanted to leave the farm altogether he was given a special bonus and provided with shelter for his family at the mine.

The state did more than tug at Farmer Ivan's sleeve. It ordered all collective farms to tighten up their operations, cut out inefficiency and graft, make the best use of their people and produce more with less man power.

In channeling men to industry the government was content to leave agriculture about 75 per cent in the hands of women and old people. In Kiev we asked the head of the State Plan Commission how he expected to grow additional food for the increased industrial population and at the same time reduce the number of farmers. "Oh," he said, "the decline in numbers will be offset by far greater mechanization."

"But," we asked, "what do you expect

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the increased industrial population to eat while it builds the machinery with which the farms will then grow the necessary additional food?" He changed the subject. The obvious answer was that there would simply be less to eat.

Soldier Ivan, coming back from the army, was also asked to come into industry. From the moment he walked into the first railroad station *agitpunkt* (which means agitation center and is a combination reading room and information point for returning veterans), lecturers, pamphlets and posters did their best to get him into industry. "It is your duty," they shouted, "to rush into the new offensive on the labor front as you did into battle during the war."

Bad News for the Bureaucrats

In the urban areas Citizen Ivan, who had a white-collar job, began to run his finger around that collar as the state reached out for him. Word came to cut the Moscow bureaucracy by 25 or 30 per cent. We don't know exactly, because there never was a public announcement. Engineers and technicians were ordered to leave clerical jobs and go into the field. The only field open was the expanding industrial apparatus in the Urals and Siberia. There was much moaning in Moscow by people who had got used to paved streets, subways, busses, theaters and a bit of metropolitan life and were now told to go east and be pioneers. By the end of the summer this comb-out was nation-wide, and hundreds of thousands were affected.

Father and Mother Ivan felt the tap on the shoulder at about the same time. In May the Soviet government had reiterated its firm intention to abolish rationing of bread and cereals by autumn, 1946. On August 29th, Pravda announced that, because of drought and diminution of the state food reserve, bread rationing would be continued another year. On September 16th, the ration price of staple foods was raised 300 per cent, the bitterest blow the people had had since the war. A wage increase for lower categories came nowhere near making up the difference. Two weeks later, on October 1st, when the people of Moscow went to get their ration cards they found that the bread ration had been cut for everyone.

Not only had the ration been cut but the age limit of "dependents"—people who could draw rations without working—was raised from 55 to 60 years for men and from 50 to 55 years for women. Which meant that five more age groups had to find jobs or stop eating.

Even Worker Ivan, who already had a factory job, was a target of the tightening process. In July, the Labor Book, which had fallen somewhat into disuse during the war, was ordered revived by the Trade Union Center. This is a document comparable to an army personnel record, listing a man's work record from his very first job. It enables the authorities to keep close check on every worker and helps enforce the law of June 26, 1940, which forbids a worker to quit his job without his boss' permission.

The next step came in August when it was announced that most of the factories

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that had been evacuated to the Urals and Siberia during the war would remain there. Thirteen hundred heavy industrial enterprises had been evacuated. No one knows how many scores—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of workers rode the flatcars east with their machines. If a factory stayed in Siberia the workers automatically stayed with it.

Take an instance: The famous Kirov works in Leningrad were largely evacuated to Chelyabinsk, in the Urals. Part of the workers were being permitted to return, the remainder not. Suppose a worker frozen in his job in Chelyabinsk decides to return anyway. He can travel freely, so he gets to Leningrad. Once back he tries to live. To get a ration card he has to have a job or enough money to buy food at commercial prices, which he couldn't do for long. If he has no family with whom he can move in, he cannot get a place to stay without a job. Because people are assigned living space only by their factory or enterprise or by the local authorities.

He might try to rent a room illegally—if he had enough money—but would then face the problem of police registration; which every human being in Russia must perform within 24 hours of arrival in a strange place. In addition anyone moving to Moscow or Leningrad needs a special permit. Sooner or later he would be caught and would face the prospect of a two-year jail sentence for having no passport and failing to register, or of being shipped back to Chelyabinsk for six months' "corrective" work in his old factory.

The Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Vishinsky, was once quoted, before he became Vice-Minister, as saying that the Soviet government had two methods—*prinuzhdenie* and *ubyezhdenie*—compulsion and persuasion. The persuasion half was vast and deadening propaganda. Every day, every hour, Ivan was worked on by pictures and words and voices. They bellowed in his ear and chucked him under the chin, pointed with pride and viewed with alarm, frightened him half silly, made him angry and cheerful—all according to plan.

The clinching argument was that Russia had to get stronger quickly because the world was again crawling with Fascists. Even former allies, especially America, were now dominated by capitalists who hated the Soviet Union and were out to destroy it. They sent spies and saboteurs into Russia and encircled her outside.

Propaganda Causes Hysteria

The Russian people are cut off completely from the outside world. There is no way in which they can learn the truth about world affairs. So it was no wonder that they were blown around in circles by the unrestrained ferocity of the propaganda gale. What with the wrangling in Paris and the Bikini tests, there was no time, day or night, when Ivan was not being beaten about the head with the bogies of atomic blackmail and capitalist menace. He came, as is inevitable, to believe in them to a very large extent; and in the course of doing so he went half hysterical.

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Rumors of war, of new, deadlier bombs that would turn everything to ice, of troop movements and secret orders played leapfrog through the streets. Finally Stalin at the end of September had to announce that he saw no immediate threat of war and there was, furthermore, no capitalist encirclement. Ivan went limp with relief. But five days later, on September 28th, the official Young Communist League newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* wrote: "As long as we live in a capitalist encirclement the danger of military offensive from outside will still exist." The agitprop was doing business at the same old stand, only henceforth the language was less incendiary.

Shortage dominates Russian life today. Wages are low—the average wage is still today about 500 rubles a month; rents are very low, while ration prices have risen. But these cover the barest necessities only. Prices in so-called commercial stores where unrationed food and consumers' goods are sold by the state are astronomical. A man's suit cost from 3,500 rubles up, a pair of shoes 1,000 or 1,200 rubles.

The average Russian is, by American standards, badly dressed, badly housed and badly fed. And the difficulties of everyday life, even though he is used to them, consume time and energy. The most characteristic sight is a queue—fifty yards long waiting at a bus stop, ten yards at a newspaper kiosk, twenty yards outside a food store. No money ever goes over the counter in a Russian store. Ivan must stand in line to pay at a cashier's booth and get a chit for which he then gets his article.

School and Hospital Conditions

Schools are crowded and work in shifts, children come home at seven o'clock in the evening, which is late night much of the year in Moscow. Hospitals are mostly old and overcrowded and would not satisfy modern American medical standards. The necessarily brusque and not infrequently defective treatment that Ivan gets deprives the otherwise admirable institution of socialized free medicine of something of its luster. Moscow is famous for its incomparable ballet and the excellent quality of some of its theater. But it's very difficult for the average citizen to get a seat—there is simply not enough room. Everything in the entertainment line is always sold out, and priority in all tickets goes to foreigners and to state and party functionaries.

Shortage has made speculation and petty crime practically universal. Speculation is the illegal barter and selling of commodities. Everyone does it, and there

Shortage has made speculation and petty crime practically universal. Speculation is the illegal barter and selling of commodities. Everyone does it, and there is not the least moral stigma to it, if it's done privately on a small scale. Women and children standing outside the Bolshoi Theater or on a Gorky Street corner with a handful of apples or a pair of socks or a pack of cigarettes aren't even bothered by the police.

Small-scale bribery is universal. Get-

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ting a pair of pants dry cleaned takes about six weeks at best. Slipping the woman behind the counter thirty rubles gets them back in one. Rationed goods are not always available. One family found that one month it could get no meat on its ration. The store to which it was attached simply had not received any. At the end of the month the meat-ration tickets were automatically devalued, and all this family could hope for was that they might get half the ration's value in sausage or chopped meat. Of course a solid token of esteem to the store manager overcomes such small difficulties.

The housing shortage has its own little rackets. I was offered a four-room furnished apartment on Gorky Street for 200,000 rubles key money. A girl I knew who lived just outside town decided she couldn't stand the train ride any more. I didn't blame her. She had a choice of being practically squashed inside, of riding on the roof or of hanging on outside and perhaps falling off, as people periodically do.

But Moscow, which has housing for about 2,000,000 people, has already swollen to 6,000,000 and no one may move to the city without special permission. The girl decided to move anyway. So she sold clothes, borrowed money, mobilized her savings and scraped together 30,000 rubles with which she illegally bought a room. Within three weeks she was discovered by the police and evicted. She lost her money. She was lucky at that. When I left Moscow, people living in the city unregistered were being given two-year jail sentences.

Murders have been committed to get rid of undesirable lodgers and sell their rooms on the black market. And the local People's Courts are jammed with interfamily feuds born almost entirely of overcrowding. As winter came with its long nights, burglaries and holdups increased. People did not go to unfamiliar parts of town, especially after dark, for fear of having their overcoats taken off their backs.

So far as the state is concerned the weariness of the average life does not matter too much in the mobilization of the people so long as this condition is accepted by everyone as normal, and unpleasant comparisons are avoided. But such comparisons cannot be avoided.

A new aristocracy has formed in the Soviet Union. The higher a man rises in the state or party hierarchy or in the army, the better his life. And that in every respect. His rations are bigger, the store for consumers' goods to which he is attached provides him with things that the average man could not buy for any price. He spends his vacation at a better resort, to which lower-ranking people have no access. He gets better medical attention if he falls ill. He may get an apartment to himself, use of an automobile, a summer house.

And the interesting thing is that as his salary goes up his cost of living goes down, because he gets permits to buy far more things at the low ration-scale prices. This has not been overlooked, and bitter jokes about the *generalshas* and *ministershas*—the generals' and ministers wives—outweigh the official attempts to

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explain privileges as compensation for important services.

Army Men Have Seen Too Much

Then, too, millions of Russian soldiers have come back to the Soviet Union after having seen something of Europe for the first time, and they are tremendously impressed. One day I had occasion to talk to a young demobilized officer. We spoke German, and there was no one else around. "You know," he said, "when you consider what you see in Germany and Czechoslovakia, it makes you think."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, the neat brick houses with the tile roofs, the room the people had to live in, the kitchens and the bathrooms. And not only for the rich in the big cities, but for the ordinary people, too, in the villages. It makes you think."

The party cannot tolerate that anyone have such thoughts. It must mobilize Ivan's mind as it has his body for the Five Year Plan.

To make sure that Ivan has only the proper food for thought, the party harnessed and completely overhauled every possible agency through which human beings communicate with other human beings. Art, music, literature, the press, motion pictures, radio were co-ordinated. Librarians, athletes, dancers, circus clowns, teachers, lecturers, book publishers, jazz-band leaders were informed that they were in the front line of the ideological war between the Communist and bourgeois ways of life. Art for art's sake, sport for sport's sake were impossible bourgeois delusions. Everything had to have a political purpose—to encourage optimism and enthusiasm, devotion to the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine.

There is no doubt that this incessant propaganda is having its effect. Ivan will soon again be as isolated from the world as he was before the war. The wartime alliance will be forgotten. But Ivan today is not the man he was 20 years ago. It remains to be seen whether the Soviet state will be able to awaken for the fourth Five Year Plan even a shadow of the enthusiasm that helped it launch the first. It may well be that the one great obstacle the men in the Kremlin will not be able to overcome is Ivan's longing for a good life, a life of his own.