The Washington Post

SUNDAY, MAY 20, 1990

Millions of Soviet Lives Pervaded by Poverty

"There in some smoky corner which, through poverty, passes for a dwelling place, a workman wakes from his sleep; all night he has been dreaming of a pair of boots . . . "
— Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "Poor Folk," 1845

First of three articles

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW

How little the dreams of Russia have changed. A decent pair of boots here is still the stuff of fantasies and stratagems, the end of a dramatic quest through the poverty of everyday life. In the Soviet Union, few live otherwise.

Poverty is always clearest among the desperate. In the underpass near Pushkin Square, old people with pensions of 2 or 3 rubles a day slump against the wall and spread a rag for spare change. Others collect bottles in alleyways for 20 kopecks apiece or sell used shoes, used sheets, used tools at the Tishinski Market. At the Kazan Station, desperate vagrants dodge the police, buy some cabbage or a bottle and try to sleep the night through on a bench or in the bathroom.

But Soviet poverty more broadly defined reaches well beyond the broke and the lost. It is a state of being for tens of millions of people and is reflected less in salary levels than in daily, unending shortages of meat and apartments, medicines and vegetables, soap and shoes.

On Nikolai Ostrovsky Lane, the airy pre-revolutionary apartments of merchants and artists long ago were divided into communal flats. Five or six families, most of them with regular salaries or pensions, share a toilet and a kitchen and take turns complaining to blank-eyed local officials about the rusted pipes, the cascade of plaster. Evenings after work, they stand endlessly in lines, hunting for milk, oatmeal, toilet paper, whatever can be found.

Beyond Moscow, miners in Vorkuta in the polar north don't have enough soap to wash the coal dust from their faces; mothers on the Far Eastern island of Sakhalin give birth in rented rooms for lack of a maternity hospital there; Byelorussian villagers scavenge scrap metal, rags or even pig fat to pay for shoes, and the staff at a huge hospital in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk reuses needles after, as one doctor admits, "We sharpen them up, straighten them out and scrape off the rust." Such stories, and countless others, are now printed in official papers that once told only of the triumphs of the Soviet system.

See POVERTY, A30, Col. 1

POVERTY, From A1

Poverty in the Soviet Union is not bloated bellies and famine, but rather a common condition of need that seems only to widen and grow worse with every month. Just as dangerous, it haunts the heart as well as the stomach.

"I watch everything around us going downhill every day, and I think that life will be even worse for my children than it is for me. For a parent, there is nothing worse," said Vagid Bairamov, a truck driver who shares a five-room apartment with 15 people on Nikolai Ostrovsky Lane.

"Do you know what that is to a person?" he asked. "To know that working harder is useless because it makes no difference? My wife and I and our three kids live in one room, and we've been waiting 10 years for our own apartment. Ten years! I don't want to call us poor, but you go ahead, I'm not arguing."

Poverty: At first the government of Mikhail Gorbachev, like those before it, could hardly bring itself to pronounce the word. But from the start, poverty has been the precondition, the bottom line of the *perestroika* reform program. The open admission that the Soviet Union was a military superpower with a ruined, aimless economy influenced virtually every critical change in Europe over the past five years, from Moscow's decision to cut its troops and let Eastern Europe go its own way to the erosion of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

"How can we feed ourselves and live decent lives? That is what it's all about," said Tatyana Zaslavskaya, a sociologist who has long been a keen intellectual influence on Gorbachev. "Everything revolves around that."

This series of three reports—first on urban poverty in Moscow, the "showpiece" of the Soviet Union, then on the vanishing villages of northern Russia and finally on the children of poverty in the Central Asian republic of Turkmenistan—will try to describe at least part of the range of Gorbachev's most critical social problem, the vast landscape of want.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn once remarked, with characteristic Russian insularity, that there are three standards of living in the world: the West, Moscow and the rest of the Soviet Union. But visitors expecting little more than long lines for vodka and a certain dowdiness are likely to be appalled—even in Moscow. Only the naive look at the opening of a few lush hotels and cooperative restaurants and speak of well-being.

To describe the Soviet Union in terms of overwhelming poverty is no longer the work of fire-breathing ideologues from abroad. Now even the press organs of the Soviet Communist Party ruthlessly survey the wreckage of everyday life. Nothing, it seems, poisons ideological purity more thoroughly than an empty shelf.

Komsomolskaya Pravda, the party's youth newspaper, blames the system (of which it is a part) as it points out that before the 1917 revolution, Russia ranked seventh in the world in per capita consumption and now is 77th—"just after South Africa but ahead of Romania."

"If we compare the quality of life in the developed countries with our own," the paper said, "we have to admit that from the viewpoint of civilized, developed society the overwhelming majority of the population of our country lives below the poverty line."

After decades of official concealment, numbers and statistics here are still notoriously unreliable. But the Soviet Union does have an official poverty line of 78 rubles a month. About 43 million people, many of them pensioners, fell below that line of "minimum material security" last year.

But no one, not even the government itself, takes the official poverty line seriously, and most officials and scholars here and in the West argue that figure should be raised to 125 rubles. At that level, about 131 million out of 285 million Soviet citizens would be registered as poor. Some Soviet experts believe the number is higher still.

"For decades we were striving to translate into life the idea of universal equality," economist Anatoli Deryabin wrote in the official journal Molodoi Kommunist. "So what have we achieved after all these years? Only 2.3 percent of all Soviet families can be called wealthy, and about 0.7 of these have earned that income lawfully .... About 11.2 percent can be called middle-class or well-to-do.

"The rest, 86.5 percent, are simply poor. What we have is equality in poverty."

Everyone agrees that income is hardly the point. Hardly anyone, save the government elite, can insulate themselves much from the Soviet version of poverty. "Even the 'millionaire' farm chairmen don't have hot water out here," a cotton farmer said in the Turkmenian countryside. Or as Soviet émigré Joseph Brodsky, the Nobel Prize-winning poet, remarked, "Money has nothing to do with it, since in a totalitarian state income brackets are of no great variety—in other words, every person is as poor as the next."

How, then, to get a sense of the problem, let alone the reasons and the solutions?

A few published figures only begin to give some sense of the scope of Soviet poverty: the average Soviet must work 10 times longer than the average American to buy a pound of meat; at least 500,000 internal refugees fled unrest in the Transcaucasus and other regions and now mainly live in ramshackle settlements; the press estimates between 1.5 and 3 million homeless, more than 1 million unemployed in Uzbekistan alone and a national infant mortality rate 250 percent higher than in most Western countries, about the same level as Panama . . . .

. . . But the numbers begin to blur, like puzzle pieces scattered on a table.

The Communal Kitchen: Every Russian's Refuge

The adult dinner shift in a communal kitchen: the children still awake and racing through the hall, a Supreme Soviet session droning away on the television, the smell of beets and ammonia, sheets and shirts like pennants strewn across a cord, drying. Sixteen people live here in five rooms. The rooms feed onto a narrow hall leading into every Russian's sacred refuge: a kitchen table covered with a red-and-white checked oilcloth.

The Bairamovs, Vagid and Khalbala, are here, as are Boris and Maria Kirval, Tanya Zhukova, and Boris and Galina Pak. Workers, drivers, housewives, a teacher, an engineer. Ludmilla Gaidacz, who lives alone in the corner room, is depressed and would rather not eat. Her mother died just the other day. Zoya Ivanovna Kuzmina, a pensioner in her late sixties, is on the phone, as always, to her sister.

Every family here—all but Zoya Ivanovna, who said she likes the "family noise" of a communal apartment—has been waiting for a place of their own for years. Not that a new apartment would be paradise either. Invariably, a new apartment means a cramped two-room flat in one of Moscow's *micro-raions*,

outer neighborhoods of almost preternatural ugliness where you can spend half a winter morning freezing and waiting for your bus into the center.

Everyone at the table works at least one job, spends hours in line and at the end of the day comes home to an apartment where noise is the norm and the toilet will fall over unless you sit on it just right.

"No one will come in to fix it—we've been calling for months—and we can't find the parts to fix it ourselves," said Vagid Bairamov. "It's 50 years old." He pointed to the bathroom ceiling, which hardly exists but for the random slabs of plaster that, for the moment, still stick. The bath is a corroded tub, used both for bathing and everyone's laundry.

"I came here to Moscow when I was still just a kid because I wanted to live better than we did in Azerbaijan," Bairamov said. "But to tell you the truth, I'm not sure Moscow is better than a lot of other cities now, not with the *preyekhavshi*," the more than 2 million people from out of town who arrive on electric trains and buses every day looking to fill their empty shopping sacks.

"It's true," said his wife, Khalbala. "By afternoon, there is nothing in the stores. If you work all day, you're forced either to look for hours or spend triple the price in the co-ops or the private market." Even without indulging at the private markets, where prices are three and four times higher, most people must spend about half their monthly salaries on groceries.

No one around the table used the word *byedni*, or poor, to describe their circumstances. Thanks to government subsidies, they have a roof, bread, free education and free hospital care. "Free. And it's worth every kopeck, too," someone cracked. Instead, they saved the word "byedni" for those with even less, those who sleep in foundation pits and empty railway cars.

But soon the talk turned to the price of a woman's winter coat (at least 400 rubles), and you realize that is two months' salary for a necessity. To buy a car these days is usually only possible on the black market, and there the price for a new Zhiguli (a kind of degraded mid-'60s Fiat) is 35,000 rubles.

The only way to buy such things is extra work, to trade services. Lately in Moscow one of the nastiest curses you can hurl at a person is, "May you live on one salary!"

And yet that is precisely what Tanya Zhukova, an engineer and a single mother, must do. Her salary is 140 rubles a month, plus the 20-ruble state subsidy she gets as a single mother for her 6-year-old son. Even by the state standard, Tanya is barely above the poverty line—but she never speaks the word.

"I have to struggle. I can get some food by ordering it through the institute where I work twice a month, but not much," she said. "To tell you the truth, this apartment is my refuge. We are lucky, because in a lot of communal flats there are arguments, scandals, one family doesn't talk to the other, and it goes on like that for years. We're the lucky ones."

Moscow's Uncountable Illegal Population

Sunday mornings you see them, tourists from across the country who have abandoned their sightseeing to roam the markets of Moscow. At the Luzhniki Market, one child's sandal and a woman's dark boot dangle by their laces from a shop door. This is the "display" of what is on sale. The line is 50 yards long and the store does not open for another half hour.

"It's better than where I've come from," said Nadia Zinova, a young woman from the Urals. "It's expensive, but I could spend a month looking for shoes where I come from. Here it's just a day or two."

But soon Zinova will have to return home. Even if she wanted to move here, it is impossible without a Moscow *propiska*, or residence permit.

So bad is the economy throughout the provinces that hundreds of thousands of young people come to Moscow and either live illegally or agree to work for especially low wages at a factory in exchange for the promise of a propiska. Such people, and there are hundreds of thousands of them in Moscow, live in overcrowded dormitories and, because of their precarious situation, have few rights as Muscovites and even fewer on the factory floor. They are called *limitchiki* and constitute a sub-class whose poverty consists not only in their minimal salaries and access to housing, but also to their lack of freedom.

"That's how I got here. That's how I started out," said Olya Koshkin, a 25-year-old construction worker who shares a bare room in a dormitory near the Danilovski Monastery with her husband, Yuri, and their 4-year-old daughter, a moon-faced little girl named Zhenya. Their entire space is the size of a small Western sitting room. The television set in the corner represents their only luxury, and it is covered over, like a religious object, with a lace doily.

Native Muscovites, for their part, have problems of their own and deeply resent the influx of limitchiki. They accuse them of emptying out the stores and helping make Moscow just another Russian town—in other words, poor. But the state enterprises continue to hire the limitchiki, knowing full well that they are cheap and grateful labor willing to do the worst jobs.

Olya came to Moscow when she was 17 to study for a year at the city's main construction trade institute and then began work at various building sites for the state. Her salary is often as little as 80 rubles a month. Her husband, after years of the same sort of work and pay, is trying to work on his own, spending 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week, repairing apartments.

After lifting crates and plastering walls all day, Olya scours the stores, especially for children's clothes. For the last six months she has been on the lookout for a jacket for Zhenya. Furniture or a car is out of the question. By day's end, Olya is bone tired, and it becomes easy to see why Russians, especially women, age so quickly. A cup of tea is pure luxury. Olya has not been to a movie "since I don't know how long." The last time she and Yuri ate in a restaurant was on their wedding day in 1985.

Like the crowd around the table on Nikolai Ostrovski Lane, Olya has lost a certain sense of promise. She watched the first Gorbachev years with the hope and expectation that the stores would begin to fill up, that the daily feeling of resentment and uncertainty would begin to ease.

"We were all believers. We all thought things would get better, and just the opposite has happened," she said.

"Yuri works like a madman. Not to get rich, but because we need the money. He says he can't rest when a winter coat is 600 or 700 rubles—it was half that a few years ago. Sometimes I think he's working himself to death and all he can say is, 'It will be better someday, I know it will.'"

But still, Moscow is that much better

than her home town in the Urals. There is no going back. Olya's mother, who still lives in a village in Bashkir, has it worse. All she can depend on every day is bread. The rest is a search.

"So I stay in Moscow," Olya said. "The state construction people promise that they'll get you a propiska after a certain period if you work well. I was one of the lucky ones. I got it in five years. Some people wait 15, and others get fired and they have to leave. You can't yell back at the bosses. They say after 10 years they'll help find an apartment, so in a couple of years my name goes on a list.

"Then the real waiting begins. The bosses play games with the lists. They play favorites, they feather their own nest. I guess they have troubles, too. Well, we'll see. I've got to hope. Maybe we'll get a place when Zhenya has children of her own."

Police Work to Keep The Homeless Invisible

You will rarely, if ever, see a homeless person on the streets of Moscow. The police make sure of that. The Moscow *bomzhi*—the acronym for the homeless that stands for "without definite residence"—sleep in cemeteries, railway stations, construction sites and basements. A favorite spot is the empty, uppermost floor of Moscow high-rises, amid the ventilation pipes and heating ducts.

"There are all kinds of bomzhi," said Alexei Lebedev, a young poverty activist who runs a small research group on the homeless and unemployed. "People who've lost their propiski, prisoners who are let go but have nowhere to go, drinkers, an addict once in a while, lost souls."

As the Soviet Union has begun to acknowledge the problem of poverty, it has allowed churches and civic organizations to begin helping the poor. No one dares any longer to maintain the fiction that the "first socialist state" requires no charity. There are now a few soup kitchens in Leningrad and Moscow. The Baptist Church here helps with clothes and food. But charity and the state are poor as well, and the homeless remain so.

Bomzhi sometimes work, sometimes for money, sometimes for a bottle of vodka. You can see them afternoons helping the local liquor store unload a truck. They collect empties in the park and on garbage heaps. At airports and train stations, bomzhi help the drivers hustle fares and then take a small cut. In Moscow they might hold a place in line; in Central Asia they'll take on migrant work at harvest time.

Many of the bomzhi around the Kazan train station say they are "between jobs" or have just lost, somehow, their propiska, or are escaping some private crisis far away. They'll do some work to get by and hope they can "get out of the hole," as one of the stalwarts of Kazan station said.

But Alik, a sawed-off man with a two-week beard and an empty bottle in his jacket, says he won't collect bottles. "Too humiliating. What am I, a dog?" he said. "I'll tell you what I do. When I need money, I take it. Like, one minute you've got your rubles, then you don't!"

Alik is 41 and has spent the better part of the last 20 years in prison camps and exile. When he gets out, he returns to the station life. He speaks pure *mat,* the ornate system of prison camp profanity. He is a bad drunk and will sometimes go three or four days without eating, "just 'cause I can't stomach it." Alik has no propiska, and hospitals can't bear him for long. He doesn't make it easy. He is irritable, by turns nasty and mean, and then, suddenly, sentimental, an autodidact who recites the poems of Pushkin and Yesenin, the songs of Vladimir Vysotsky.

"My father and mother worked morning till night just to support us kids," Alik said, sitting in a deserted courtyard. "My brother was killed in Hungary in '56. He was 19. Sometimes I think if he had survived I might not have started the way I did.

"I ran away when I was 16 or 17, went off to Kazakhstan. I was going hungry and so I lifted my first purse. That's how my prison career started. I got five years in the Tashkent camp for teenagers. I've been all over the Kritaya [the prison zone] ever since. You sit in a rank cell and get 20 minutes' exercise a day and you're hungry, lying there on the cold concrete. I started getting sick that way.

"We bomzhi stay in these places 24 hours a day and we're always worried we're gonna get clubbed by the cops, day and night. We have nowhere to go. I'm telling you this on behalf of the Soviet homeless who are punished for their destinies. No rights, no propiska, nothing. It's tough when you get out of jail. It's like you're a third-class citizen and nobody needs your life."

At times, Alik stops talking and begins humming and singing a Vysotsky song about a man going off to jail and never seeing his beloved again. And then he'll break it off and stare out into space and take another swig on his bottle:

"So how do I break this cycle? I just don't know. One of my buddies comes up to me the other day, yesterday maybe, and says he'll smash my face if I don't stop drinking, and I said, 'You son of a bitch, I can't stop. I can't.'

"I worked some in Uzbekistan, but it didn't last. Never got along with the bosses. Worked on an oil rig once, too. I've never worked a single day in Moscow. For me, 300 rubles a month and a flat, and I'd make it all right. But I don't have it. So where should I go? You tell me."

NEXT: Russia's dying villages

The Washington Post
MONDAY, MAY 21, 1990

Soviet Farm Legacy: Dead Souls in a Dying Countryside

Second of three articles

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

SPASSKAYA, U.S.S.R.

Behind the ruined church, the cemetery is filling up. Every six months or so, a workman arrives from the city, borrows a shovel and digs a grave. No one has been born in Spasskaya in 25 years. Soon another of the peasant villages of the north Russian plain will be little more than a row of empty cabins, a graveyard and wheel ruts in the mud.

Maria Kuznetsova, a stooped old woman with fierce, squinty eyes, spends her days tending her chicken coop and gossiping with her neighbors along the rails of a rotten pine fence. There are 17 people left in Spasskaya—once there were hundreds—and at 75, Maria Kuznetsova is among the youngest. "On winter days," she said, "we check the other houses. If there's no smoke coming out of one of the chimneys it usually means another one of us is dead."

All the talk along the fence at Spasskaya is of loss and decay, a process that began 60 years ago with Joseph Stalin's decision to force peasants off their private plots and onto huge collective farms. Millions starved to death or were executed by the secret police. Just north of here, the police crammed countless peasants into a complex of labor camps. They ripped the crosses and icons out of the churches and used the transepts and basements as holding cells. In this region alone, 25,000 children died in the churches over a three-month period.

In a matter of a few years, an entire fabric of social relations, of village life, was in shreds. The "masters of the land" were suddenly servants of the state, stripped of their religion, their traditions and their will.

Here in the countryside surrounding the north Russian city of Vologda, the legacy of collectivization haunts an impoverished everyday life and mocks the promises of a bountiful future. Here the legacy is of dying villages, hopelessly unproductive state farms and urban despair. In the Vologda region alone, there are more than 7,000 "ruined" villages, scenes of abandonment

See POVERTY, A16, Col. 1

POVERTY, From A1

a overty much like Maria Kuznetsova's Spasskaya.

For decades, the young have been abandoning the wasted villages in waves, searching for a decent wage in the textile and machine-tool plants of Vologda. Like others before them, their search for the industrial utopia has been fruitless. Only a very few use the word poverty to describe both the urban and rural legacy of collectivization, but there is no other word for it.

In Vologda, half the population of 280,000 is on waiting lists for decent apartments. People live mainly in collapsing wooden houses from the 19th century or, worse, four- and five-story concrete warrens that seem 50 years old even before they open. More than 30,000 live in grim factory-owned dormitories, sometimes four or five to a tiny room. Grocery-store shelves are so barren that the near empty shops of Moscow seem like a cornucopia by comparison.

In Spasskaya, Maria Kuznetsova lives on a pension of less than 3 rubles a day. Not long ago, before new pension levels were adopted, retired farmers got a ruble a day. Kuznetsova's meals are mainly bread, milk, macaroni, cabbage soup, potatoes and salted fat. If she needs to see a doctor or go to the store, she must walk two miles down a road of mud and stones to catch a bus that "comes when it comes." During the winter, when temperatures hit 30 and 40 degrees below zero and the snow piles up, she said, "we are prisoners."

Kuznetsova doesn't read newspapers much, but she keeps abreast of Moscow's ambitions. And yet she sees only failure and more poverty ahead. "We listen to the radio and hear all that talk about 'Land for the Peasants' and private farming, but who's going to do the work?" she asked. "Who is going to save the countryside? One generation should hand down what it knows and what it has collected to the next. But all that is broken. Everyone has long since left for the cities. The collective farms are a disaster. There's nothing left. It's all lost."

One of Kuznetsova's neighbors, Anatoli Zamokhov, leaned out the window of his filthy, dilapidated cabin and cackled viciously. He spit at the sound of the word Moscow. "I'll tell you about Moscow," he said, taking an angry drag on a foul cigarette.

"Before the Bolsheviks, my parents and their parents lived decently. Th eren't rich—not by any means, God knows—but they had food and a cow and a table to call their own. Now everyone lives for himself. No one visits anyone on Easter. We were all supposed to be one big family after collectivization. Just the opposite! Everyone was pitted against everyone else, everyone suspicious of everyone else. Now look at us, a big stinking ruin. What a laugh, what a big goddamn laugh."

For decades, to tell the true story of collectivization in Russia and the Ukraine was considered a crime against the state. Even now, many official Soviet academics use euphemisms like "errors" and "misguided ideas" to describe a policy that historian Robert Conquest, the leading Western expert on collectivization, says led to the death of about 14 million people. "No one was keeping count," Nikita Khrushchev once said.

The late novelist Vassily Grossman was one of the few to confront the period, writing in his "Forever Flowing" of the ruin and despair of collectivization. "The village moaned as it foresaw its approaching death," he wrote in 1963. "Where has the life gone? Can it really be that nothing at all is left of it?"

The Witnesses of Priluki: Memory and Survival

The historic Soviet contempt for the peasant is rooted in the writings of Lenin, the founder of the Bolshevik state. His revolution never appealed to the farmers, and Lenin, for his part, was always suspicious of the peasantry, calling them *myelki khozyaiki*—roughly, "little capitalists." Before the revolution, Alexander Solzhenitsyn has estimated, the peasantry constituted more than 80 percent of the Slavic population. Today, many of those "little capitalists" not already in mass graves, urban bunkers or dying villages live in the *inter-nats,* state-run homes for the aged.

Not far from Spasskaya, about 100 villagers live at the inter-nat in the town of Priluki, near an abandoned monastery. The place is run by a well-intentioned, kind woman named Zoya Matreyeva. She and her small staff do what they can to keep the place clean, care for the sick and dying and arrange decent burials when the time comes. She has lived here for many years and says that the old people yearn only for the village life before the ruin began.

Soviet and Western historians describe the harsh conditions, the drunkenness and bigotry of the pre-revolutionary villages in such stark terms that it seems impossible for anyone to be nostalgic for them. Impossible, that is, until the surviving villagers describe what came afterward, in the early 1930s.

"We even have a few old Communist Party members here, people who worked half their lives and more on the collective farms, but you won't find one who believes in collectivization," Matreyeva said. "They talk about the cows and chickens they had, how it was theirs and they cared about it. Then it was all stripped away."

The inter-nat dining room is a dim place of buckled linoleum, fluorescent light and Lenin's portrait. The old women, plump and toothless, peasant scarves tied around their heads, shuffle to their seats. The men eat in a separate room, and there are only a few of them—nearly all were lost in the war of 1941-45. Each place is set with a bowl of soup, a large tin spoon and two small pieces of brown bread. Zoya Matreyeva, for 40 years a loyal employee of the state, has a point she'd like to prove.

"Grandmothers!" she said. "Maybe you can tell our visitor about what you remember about the old days. The old days before you were on the *kolkhozi*"—collective farms.

The old women stopped stirring the sour cream into their soup and looked up. Some stared ahead, and others began smiling as they jogged memory into being.

"These gigantic state farms killed the villages and put nothing in their place," said one, and then they all began to chime in.

"Six of the families from our village were dragged away and we never saw them again."

"In my village, there were 120 houses. Now there are 10, and the only people who live there now are people who use the houses on weekends to get out of the city. They garden, they don't farm."

"I had to spend my life feeding something called the state. Now at least the state feeds me."

"My grandchildren wouldn't know what to do with a piece of land. Even my own children have a hard time telling the difference between a horse and a cow. Are these the new 'masters of the land'?"

"One generation is supposed to show the next how to live. One generation is supposed to build something so the next can carry on. That was all cut off. Destroyed. Does Gorbachev think you can rebuild that in a day? In five years?"

After a while, the old women quieted down. In a way they seemed happy for a moment to have a visitor ask a question or two, but as the memories rushed forth, the women grew sullen and tired, and they ate.

The Lower Depths: Hunger and Heartbreak

In the decades after collectivization, the countryside emptied into hundreds of provincial cities like Vologda.

To bolster his drive for massive industrialization, Stalin kept wages on the collective farms at pathetically low levels—so low that some farmers in the 1950s were making just 2 or 3 kopecks a day. They survived only by collecting wild mushrooms or growing secret cabbage patches at the risk of a term in the camps. When they could escape to the city for a 15-ruble-a-month factory job, they felt suddenly rich.

Vologda in the era of Mikhail Gorbachev is typical of hundreds of provincial cities, a dim and joyless sight. Poverty here does not mean mass starvation and bloated bellies. The homeless stay out of sight, sleeping in the railway station, in abandoned basements and at the city dump.

"To tell you the truth, I probably make more money out here collecting empty bottles for 20 kopecks apiece than I would on a construction job in town," said Vitya Karsokos as he searched through the rubble at the Vologda dump. "My biggest problem is I have to sleep in the train station or out here in a box somewhere. I'd get a job in town if I could, but good luck."

Most people in Vologda live in hideous public housing and eat a diet of starch and fat. "We are not poor. We get by," they say. "No one is dying. We don't need a Mercedes Benz." And yet if the meanness of these lives is not poverty, it is hard to imagine what is.

Every morning, Andrei Salnikov arrives at his office at the city newspaper, Krasni Sever (The Red North), and listens to the voices of desperation. He is the paper's letters editor, and in the Soviet Union, people have always directed their complaints to the press. Vologda's pain is a stack of onionskin papers on Salnikov's desk.

"To read these letters m[illegible]s you realize it's as if we are living in some other century, some dark time in the past. There are mornings I can't stand to read it all," Salnikov said.

"Every letter is like a private tragedy. An old woman stands in line for days, say, to buy a simple toilet. And then she discovers she has lost the tiny slip of paper that allows her to make the purchase. And no one will help her, no one will believe her, and so she turns to us with her story. It breaks you in half just to read it. And there is nothing anyone can do for her. We live in a world that Kafka and Gogol only dreamed of."

Butter, sausage, sugar, tea, soap, washing powder and vodka are rationed. People barter services for goods if they can. The city's Gypsies deal in black-market ration coupons. On Sundays, workers sell old shoes, clothes, books, anything for an extra ruble or, better, an extra ration coupon for meat or tea. There are three furniture factories in Vologda, yet people wait years to buy a simple chair or bookshelf.

"We have no idea what 'well-off' means. Practically everyone is poor," Salnikov said. "People with children will go weeks without soap. The rain and the snow comes pouring through the roof, and no one comes to fix it. There is rarely any hot water and sometimes no water at all. Try buying any consumer goods: an overcoat, a TV set, a car. If you can't pay triple on the black market, you might as well forget it. The only thing that stands between these people and hunger is bread, and maybe plain macaroni, potatoes and beets. . . . Some days I just can't bear to read these letters."

There is so little in the shops in Vologda that people regularly buy third-class train tickets to Moscow or Leningrad to try their luck there. "I'm one of the lucky ones," said Yuri Zhigailov, the paper's editor in chief and a member of the city's Communist Party leadership. "And the luckiest thing for me is that my son lives in Moscow and comes up with a full sack of food and goods twice a month. Who else can afford that?"

Vologda is not only poor, it is ignored. Although the local Communist Party committee found 5 million rubles to build a gleaming new headquarters in the middle of town, there is hardly a kopeck for the most basic city services. The roadsides are heaped with old garbage, broken concrete and glass. Children play in the rubble, like a scene out of a postwar photograph. The streets are cleaned so rarely that people choke from the dust.

In fact, there are not more than a few roads in Vologda that do not threaten the sturdiest axle. On the way to the city's open-air black market one Sunday morning, a cab driver swerved away from a rut as big as a grave, only to ditch the car in an open manhole.

Near the Vologda River, the roads are worse. The houses are as dilapidated as any in Appalachia, and yet no one talks of the Za Rechi district of Vologda as the "shame of the nation" or even as especially poor.

"Better ask, 'What's rich?'" said Yelena Makushova, an office worker in her forties who shares a room the size of a walk-in closet with her husband and two children in Za Rechi. They are one of nine families that live in the rambling shack at 2 Gorki St.

"Until we started seeing pictures of the way the West lives on television a couple of years ago, we all thought the way we live is 'normal life.' We thought it was normal that when the water pipes freeze up every winter, you just go to the river, crack the ice and get water and clean your clothes. We thought it was normal that you get nothing but bone from the butcher unless you pay a bribe. We thought it was normal that the fish you buy in the stores—when you can find it—is rotten, and the ration allowance for one person for sausage—the only meat you can really get—is one pound a month.

"We thought all that was normal and that Soviet life was the best life of all. Never mind that if you get sick and go into a hospital here you consider yourself lucky if you get out alive. That's just the way things are. It was hard to know much better until recently, especially in the provinces. So how can I talk about 'rich' or 'poor'?"

The family works hard. Kuznetsova's husband is a bulldozer operator; she works part-time at a factory and cares for the children. The family does not starve, she said, adding, "We survive. We get by." Breakfast is tea, bread and butter. Lunch is cabbage soup, tea and a scrawny chicken wing or leg. Dinner is sour cream, a small slice of the monthly sausage and tea.

"We have to watch out with the tea, though," she said. "Drink too much tea too soon and it's all gone until next month."

The Inheritors: Hope and Suspicion

The next generation, those in their thirties and twenties, are in many cases not as lucky as Kuznetsova's family. They, too, work in city factories, but more often than not they have to live in huge concrete dormitories.

Dormitory 131-B at the city's biggest textile factory is a depressing, but typical, hostel—worn concrete and prefab construction, pea-green halls, tiny, crowded rooms and a ramshackle Kontakt Social Club on the first floor. On the bulletin board, a memo commands, "Each resident takes part in the social life of the collective, develops himself in sport and takes part in amateur night."

Nina Karelina is married and has three small children. She is a pretty young woman but seems permanently exhausted. There is a closet-sized eating area and a bedroom where all five sleep.

"When one of us is sick, we all get sick," Karelina said. "When one cries, we're all up. It is all very hard on the nerves, but there is not much we can do. We've waited six years, and the housing people say that we're 'first priority.' They say that means five years more at least. I have one dream in life. I dream about a two-room apartment."

And yet Karelina and the other residents of Dormitory 131-B say they would never dream of "returning to the land," as the latest posters implore. "For all its decay, "the shopping is better in Vologda," Karelina said.

For the young living on the state farms around Vologda, life has grown not only hard but cynical. Down the hill from the village of Spasskaya is the Prigorodni State Farm. Visitors are welcomed by a portrait of Lenin and a tattered sign, "We Are Coming to the Victory of Communist Labor." Here, the three-story concrete apartment blocks are even more slipshod than in town. Salaries depend on the size of the potato and cabbage crop, and the harvest has been poor.

Even on the farm, the local store is a study in want. The shelves offer only three-quarters-filled jars of suppurating pickled tomatoes and gutted eggplants. To buy a box of Indian tea you need a special permission slip.

The farmers at Prigorodni are suspicious about the latest news from Moscow, the new laws on property and land that would allow them to rent their own plots and work as family farmers. Nearly everyone at Prigorodni remembers what happened to their parents or grandparents, how the most successful among them were deported or killed.

"I guess I'm the only true believer here, the only one," said Yuri Kamarov, 27, a farmer who dreams of raising livestock and vegetables on a plot that is now little more than a swatch of mud and rubble.

Every day after work, Kamarov labors alone, building a house for his wife and daughter. The neighbors come by sometimes and laugh. He has taken out a 24,000-ruble loan, which means, he said, "I'm up to my eyeballs in debt for the rest of my life. That's the gamble.

"Let them laugh. Maybe they're right, and nothing will ever change," the true believer said, "but it's time I started living a real life, a life like my grandfather had long before the disasters began."

NEXT: Dying infants in Central Asia

The Washington Post

TUESDAY, MAY 22, 1990

THE VAST LANDSCAPE OF WANT

POVERTY IN THE U.S.S.R.

In Soviet Central Asia, Death Stalks the Children

Last of three articles

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

ASHKHABAD, U.S.S.R.

In the mud-brick hovels on the outskirts of Ashkhabad, children are the first casualties of poverty. Every year, thousands of infants throughout Turkmenistan and the rest of Soviet Central Asia die within 12 months of birth. Countless others suffer more slowly, weakened by the heat and infected water, the pesticides from the cotton fields, a diet built on bread and tea and soup.

"I consider myself fairly lucky. I've given birth five times, and only one child died," said Elshe Abayeva, a woman of 31 who looks 50. Some of her children played on a hillock of mud and garbage as she cut grass with a blunt scythe. Farther up the road, Abayeva's neighbors, the Karadiyevs, are not so lucky. "Five children are alive and three died—two at birth and one after a month," the father said. "In Turkmenia, it's like this all the time. Worse in the villages."

Inside the Abayevs' two-room hut, the bare bulbs are furred with dust, flies buzz around the children's faces. The children are filthy and their clothes are frayed. Only heavy stones keep the tin roof from blowing off the outhouse and the rusted chicken coop. Aba Abayev, Elshe's husband, earns 170 rubles a month as a video technician for state television—less than 6 rubles a day to support a family of six. The Abayevs have been waiting since 1975 to be assigned a decent, legal apartment.

BY EDUARD GLADKOV FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Elshe Abayeva stands with three of four surviving children outside her mud-brick hut in Turkmenistan.

"When that child was born, it was a cold winter morning," Aba Abayev said. "No one has phones here, and there are no hospitals or doctors around. I ran two or three kilometers to the pay phone and called. It looked like the baby was dying—or was dead already, maybe—and it took the doctors more than an hour to get here. By then the child was dead. This is the way our lives go out here. I have no

See POVERTY, A18, Col. 1

POVERTY, From A1

hope, to be honest. And for my children, I don't think things will change, unless they get worse somehow."

In Turkmenistan, the official infant mortality rate in 1989 was 54.2 infants per 1,000 births, the highest for any republic in the Soviet Union, 10 times higher than in most West European counties and more than 2½ times that of Washington, the city with the highest U.S. rate. Turkmenistan is about on a level with Cameroon.

In especially poor regions, such as Tashauz in the north, the rate soars to a staggering 111 deaths in every 1,000 births, and some Soviet and Western experts say the Central Asian republics underreport their infant mortality rates by as much as 60 percent.

Foreign and Soviet tourists come to Turkmenia for a glimpse of the exotic, to escape the concrete-and-dun landscapes of Moscow for the outdoor bazaar in the Kara Kum desert where traders deal in kaleidoscopic carpets, antique silver bangles and wine-and-gold velvet dresses. But the quaintness of the region does little to deflect attention from the poverty here: village hospitals with no running water or disposable syringes, debilitating child labor, malnutrition, inbreeding and ecological catastrophe.

Children here fall sick from a host of causes. Working in the cotton fields, they often drink from irrigation sources poisoned with pesticides and toxic minerals. Even seeing a doctor can be dangerous. In the first year of their lives, Turkmenian children are given an average of 200 to 400 injections, compared to three to five for American children.

"The doctors are inept and throw everything they have in the medicine cabinet at these poor kids, and within a few years the effect of the vaccines and so on is down to zero. The chance of terrible infectious disease multiplies out of sight," said Murray Feshbach a specialist in Soviet health care at Georgetown University. "Given the shortage of disposable syringes, the chances for transmitting AIDS and hepatitis is almost too terrible to think about. God help those kids."

Everything that has gone wrong with the Soviet system over the decades—the centralization of authority, the vacuum of responsibility and incentive, the triumph of ideology over sense—is magnified in Central Asia. Here the system is often described as "feudal socialism," a Soviet-Asiatic hierarchy led by Communist Party bosses and collective-farm chairmen. Ironically, Moscow's moves toward decentralization have only given those staunchly conservative regional bosses more authority.

"We had always been brought up to believe that our system was the best, that our lives were the best, and now we find just the opposite," said Yuri Kirichenko, a pediatrician at the Institute of Health Care for Mothers and Children in Ashkhabad, the Turkmenian capital, and a Communist Party member for 25 years. "This is not Africa—children are not starving to death in the same blatant way—but there is no way to hide it anymore: We are poor and we are suffering."

Outside Kirichenko's door, dozens of Turkmenian women, many of them pregnant, pace the hall and wait hours for treatment for themselves and their children. Some of the pregnant women are in their late forties and have already had a dozen or more children.

Some of the region's cultural traditions do nothing to ease the infant-mortality crisis. Because of the tribal legacy here, there is a high rate of inbreeding—marriages among close cousins and other relatives. Many Turkmenian men scorn birth control, and women frequently give birth twice in one year, believing that more children will bring greater wealth—"more hands, more rubles"—but the opposite is true.

The Islamic tradition of *kalim*, or bride purchase, means that many young couples spend nearly all their meager incomes paying off the loans necessary for a payment to the woman's family of as much as 40,000 rubles. As a result, the couple is particularly poor just when the woman is in her prime childbearing years, and the effect on the family diet and child health can be ruinous.

"Of course, we need to educate people on birth control and all the rest. But as a party member—and it hurts me to say this—the truth is that poverty here is tied to politics," said Kirichenko. "Ninety percent of the blame lies with the system, the bureaucracy, the command system, the centralization of control. There is no escaping that."

Photograph of a Child: Hollow Eyes, Brittle Body

Mukhamed Velsapar, a young writer and one of Turkmenia's handful of dissident voices, grew up near the town of Mary, east of Ashkhabad. He was one of eight children. He never knew, until long after he was a young man and had seen the relative wealth of Moscow, that he had been raised in poverty.

"And that is the mind-set of nearly all Turkmenians: 'We have bread, we have tea, we have a roof, we are alive—therefore, we are not poor,' " he said. "These people have no basis for comparison. There are 73 newspapers in the republic, and not one of them has any degree of freedom."

A few years ago, Velsapar and his young family lived in a mud hut on the outskirts of Ashkhabad, not far from the Abayev family. The district is called Nakhal-stroi, a semi-legal slum where people build their own crude shelters because there are no apartments left in the city center. Now Velsapar lives in what passes for middle-class comfort—a crumbling concrete apartment house that seems as unsteady as it is ugly. Ashkhabad is in an earthquake zone. In 1948, a massive quake killed

...0,000 people—about two-thirds of the ...'s population at the time. Joseph Stalin refused to accept any foreign aid, and beyond Ashkhabad, the disaster was only a rumor.

"That is yet another of our problems now," Velsapar said. "The earthquake wiped out practically the entire Turkmenian intelligentsia. We lost whatever roots of free thought we might have had."

Last year, along with a few hundred other writers, journalists and workers in Ashkhabad, Velsapar organized Ogzibirlik, a democratic advocacy group with two key aims: to bring *glasnost,* or openness, to Turkmenistan and to encourage radical economic change to end what one member calls "the cycle of poverty and the colonization of our resources." Members of Ogzibirlik have met with nationalist leaders in the Soviet Baltic republics for crash courses on developing a mass movement.

The Ogzibirlik activists believe that the ruin of Central Asia has been the decades-old demand from economic planners of Moscow that the republics turn most of their farmland into cotton fields. The cotton monoculture, they say, directed by Moscow planners and Central Asian overlords, has sent the region every plague from the tragic infant death rate to the drying up of the Aral Sea in the cause of irrigation.

Ogzibirlik has struggled, seemingly powerless to challenge the republic's powerful Communist boss, Saparmurad Niyazov, and the rest of what it calls the "local party mafia." Group members were branded "right-wingers" and "reactionaries" and were unable to register candidates for the recent Turkmenian elections. Velsapar says he is often interrogated by party officials. "They'll just blatantly say they have been listening to my phone conversations and then make some wild accusation," he said.

When will we have democracy in Turkmenia? one Ogzibirlik member asked Niyazov recently. "I am democracy," the party boss replied.

Velsapar did succeed, however, in stirring up the party leadership here last month by publishing a short article and a tiny photograph in the weekly newspaper Moscow News. "It is hard to believe," the piece begins, "but the majority of Turkmenian children in our time are permanently undernourished."

For local authorities, Velsapar's article was a humiliation. Not so much because it exposed the problem of infant mortality—there have been articles in local papers—but because it appeared outside Turkmenist... a paper read by the country's liberal intelligentsia.

"It was a libel on all of us!" said Geral Kurbanova, vice president of the republic's Children's Fund. "No one goes hungry here. The Turkmenian people love to eat! And poor? Oh, they have lots of money, cars—two sometimes. They could buy proper food if they wanted, but instead they buy carpets and expensive dresses."

What intensified the furor was the accompanying photograph of an emaciated 2-year-old child named Guichgeldi Saitmuradov. The image is hellish, like something out of the worst Ethiopian famines—hollow, desperate eyes, a bare skeleton for a body.

Several sources corroborated the boy's fate: After repeated trips to a hospital near his parents' collective farm in the Tashauz region, the boy died in 1988. Before Guichgeldi's death, however, Khummet Annayev, a physician and senior researcher at the Institute for the Health of Mothers and Children, made a research trip to the region. He reported dire shortages of meat, butter, chicken and other foodstuffs over a 10-year period, abuse of pesticides and defoliants, miserable medical facilities. And when he saw Guichgeldi in a medical clinic, he asked someone to take the photograph that would eventually be published in Moscow News.

"In our republic, anything can grow, so there should be no hunger at all," Annayev said. "I'd never seen anything like this since World War II."

Inevitably, the higher the official, the greater the denial. "We have a problem with infant mortality here, but there is no hunger in Turkmenia," said Kurbanova of the Children's Fund. "An aberration," said the republic's deputy health minister, Dmitri Tessler, who pronounced Velsapar an "adventurer" and Annayev "out of his depth." The republic's newspapers never reprinted Velsapar's article, but they did run countless denunciations triple its length.

But doctors who work every day with Turkmenian women and children see it another way. Kirichenko says he regrets the storm the article created, but he found it "generally accurate."

"I wouldn't say the case of the emaciated boy in Tashauz is typical, but I have seen such children in this country, not only here in Central Asia, but also in Krasnodar, in Russia, where my last job was," Kirichenko said. "Best not to call it starvation, maybe. But it is hunger and, most of all, protein deficiency."

The government has increased its attention to infant mortality here to some degree, providing some food products free for children under 2. Kirichenko even calls some of the efforts "heroic."

But at the same time, the Turkmenian leadership seems determined to control the debate on infant mortality and poverty. Several Ogzibirlik leaders say they have been blacklisted, unable to publish their books. Last year, director Yuri Karagezov made a film about child malnutrition and the use of chemical agents in the cotton fields. It was called "Diagnosis," and one doctor here said the footage of childhood suffering "looked like Leningrad during the Nazi blockade. It made my hair stand on end. I couldn't sleep for nights."

The Turkmenian government banned "Diagnosis" and seized the only copy.

On the Collective Farm: White Gold and Slow Death

Broad-bellied and wearing a crisp suit and a panama hat, Muratberdi Sopiyev looks like an antebellum Mississippi plantation owner. He is one of the most powerful men in the republic, a member of the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow and, for the last 30 years, chairman of the Soviet Turkmenistan collective farm.

"We have democracy here on the farm," Sopiyev said. "Every so often I'll tell the people they can nominate an alternative candidate, but they say, 'Oh, no! Never! No need!' and that's that. Ho, ho!"

As he waits for his private car to take him into the capital, Sopiyev stands like royalty in front of the farm headquarters. With its marble pillars and fountain, the place looks like a cross between a bureaucratic palace in the West and an emir's mansion in the East. By this country's standards, Soviet Turkmenistan is a model farm: There is a gleaming Palace of Culture, a varied harvest of vegetables, potatoes and fruit, mud-brick houses that seem better constructed than those on the outskirts of Ashkhabad and in other villages.

The one recent Moscow innovation that seems to be taking hold here and on other farms in Turkmenistan is family farming, under which families are allowed to lease a plot on the collective farm and then sell its produce.

But the nationwide family-lea[illegible] plan has also turned out to be hazardou[illegible] childrens' health, especially in Central Asia. While the government has taken limited measures to see that children are not pulled out of school and sent into the fields for harvests, the families themselves have used the new independence to exploit their own offspring. Once more the children are in the fields, breathing and drinking poisons.

Sopiyev is one of hundreds of Central Asian legislators who are rarely heard from in Moscow. They are the silent majority, a huge bloc that never challenges the leadership and rarely fails to jeer the radical reformists. One of the few times the Turkmenian delegation has been heard from came last month when the national president of the Children's Fund, Albert Likhanov, praised Velsapar's article in Moscow News. "Shame!" they shouted. "Libel!"

"We here in Turkmenia don't believe that chatter and protest have anything to do with democracy," the delegation chairman said.

Sopiyev said the rate of infant mortality on his farm is "not so bad" as in the rest of the republic—"45 out of 1,000," but that is still more than double that of Washington. Like the rest of the Turkmenian leadership, Sopiyev sees the "triumph of communism" as the road out of poverty.

"We have to keep fulfilling, even overfulfilling, the five-year plans," he said. "We don't need private property. Not in this country. That will only bring exploitation. No one wants it. We know that in capitalist countries they have very, very poor people. We don't have that. We provide free apartments, gas, education, medical care.

"We don't need a multi-party system, either. We don't need the chaos that would bring. We need the Communist Party, and we have to follow the party line. That is the way to wealth." With that, Sopiyev got into his car, and his driver took him to a ministry in Ashkhabad where the republic gets its instructions from Moscow.

From a desert road west of Ashkhabad, not far from the hills that mark the Iranian border, one can see endless cotton fields and mulberry trees and numerous, easy symbols of the republic's poverty—a crumbling, concrete Communist Party emblem, peeling propaganda posters extolling the harvest of the "white gold" cotton crop.

In the town of Bakharden, the Mir Collective Farm bakes in the dust. A mother and her dirt-caked, vacant-eyed daughter stood by a gate; a ragged dog slept curled in the road. In contrast to the palatial farm headquarters at Soviet Turkmenistan, the main building here is a fly-infested outpost with a few ancient desks, a half-empty bookshelf and a portrait of Lenin framed in gold.

"There's no secret, this is a poor farm," said Amanmuradov Chari, the deputy director of the farm's agricultural committee. "We have about a 3.5-million ruble debt that we're working off." Mir is just one of thousands of such farms forged together in the 1930s when Stalin wiped out private farming with his bloody campaign of collectivization.

At a small house nearby, a young woman named Aino Balliyeva served tea to her visitors. She is 20 years old and unmarried. She picks cotton in the fields and helps care for the house. She said she has heard that there are dangers in the work, that she is undoubtedly taking in pesticides and defoliants that will one day hurt her children.

"But what can I do about it?" she asked. "I want to have children, because that is life. And as for the rest, I just don't know what to do. None of us do."