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Four distinguished journalists (Smith and Shipler with the *New York Times*, Kaiser with the *Washington Post*, and Pond with the *Christian Science Monitor*) and, in the case of the Cracraft book, twenty-six scholars have provided the West with invaluable insights into the Soviet people and the everyday operation of the major Communist society. These correspondents and scholars contribute to a major strength of our system: free access to information. However, our disinclination to read such important books results in little difference in understanding within the Soviets’ restricted society and our free society, for in the West far too many have unencumbered or, worse, closed minds.

Smith and Kaiser served in the USSR for three years each, Pond for two, and Shipler for four. All of them are extraordinarily perceptive and thorough, and one may read any of these works with confidence and great benefit. From this group, Smith and Kaiser were the first (in 1976) to give a detailed picture of contemporary Soviet life. Their work was a groundbreaking achievement. Both books are good, but Smith’s is probably the more adequate of the two. He has provided his revised 1984 edition with a strong sixty-three-page postscript treating the last years of Brezhnev’s life, Andropov’s one-year tenure, and Chernenko’s rule.

Pond concocts an ingenious frame for her book—a 5,800-mile Siberian Express train ride from the Yaroslavsky Station in Moscow to Vladivostok in the Far East. With her in the train compartment for seven days are three other women, a Russian grandmother, mother, and daughter—three generations of Russian “Everywomen” representing converging but also, at times, three distinct points of view. Pond not only describes the conversations and behavior of her train-mates but
also the areas through which they pass and a host of related features from Soviet life. The author manages to encompass essentially all that her colleagues cover in their books. She is more statistical (and her figures are more current) and treats some aspects that Smith and Kaiser do not discuss in detail; for instance, the new Soviet Constitution of 1977, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and recent developments in arms competition between the superpowers. Hers is also the only of the four correspondents' books with an adequate bibliography.

Shipler elegantly restates many of his colleagues' insights and makes his greatest contribution in a discussion of themes, values, attitudes, and culture in Soviet life. His treatment of a resurgent Christianity, of bedrock patriotism, of a longing for a strong leader who could bring the order, efficiency, vision, and charisma of Stalin, and of a renewed and powerful Russian nationalism is especially informative. But his best section is the book's last chapter, "Beyond the Walls," in which he attempts with considerable success to place his sheltered and confident Western reader in Russian boots. In one particularly memorable section Shipler reports on a talk delivered by a Soviet journalist to his comrades after he returned from a visit to the U.S., and we see several reasons Soviets tolerate or even prefer their system over ours.

All four authors explain the importance of the Russian terms pokazukha, nomenklatura, blat, na levo, and samizdat, essential to an appreciation of life in the Soviet sphere. They speak of current membership in the Communist party (Smith: 14 million; Kaiser: 15; Pond: 17; and Shipler: 16) and of the number of believers (Smith: 30 million Russian Orthodox; Kaiser: 30–50 million; Pond: 55–82 million Christians and, presumably, Muslims). Also, Smith, Kaiser, and Pond each have somewhat different statistics for how much more food is produced on the "private plots" than in the giant collective and state farms. But the common conclusion is that the incentives of the marketplace bring vastly more agricultural success than do the incentives of the collective.

In addition to treating many of the same topics in much the same way, the four authors are uniquely strong. Smith is both lively and analytical. His account is most encyclopedic. Kaiser's anecdotes are exceptionally rich and revealing (to the question of why the Russians treated Solzhenitsyn so harshly, a Soviet spokesman replied that "Solzhenitsyn had slandered his homeland and even its founder, Lenin. What would happen, he asked, if a writer in America wrote a book..."
slandering Lincoln or Jefferson’’). His creative exuberance leads him to several original and perceptive formulations, for example, on the typical “‘Party line’” and ways the Soviets are not like Americans. At times (only a few), however, he may be too willing to accept the colorful example at the cost of accuracy or proportion. Elizabeth Pond is, in some ways, the most rigorous and disciplined of the four. Beyond her frame arises a collection of tight and spare essays on major issues. For example, her treatment of Soviet intellectuals is brilliant and definitive. Shipler’s work is the most “‘poetic,’” eloquent, and philosophical. This is not to suggest that he ignores the mundane but revealing details noted by his colleagues, but that his finest pages concern broad themes and values.

James Cracraft’s excellent book originates from a series of articles published in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists between January 1982 and the fall of 1983. It includes twenty-six chapters written by experts (many of whom were “‘associated at one time or another with the Russian Research Center at Harvard, where much of this book was planned—indeed, written’” [viii]) in history, politics, the armed forces, the physical context, the economy, science and technology, culture, and society.

Professor Cracraft is the first to fill the critical need for a “‘book on the Soviet Union written by experts but addressed to the general reader’” (vii). It is, he continues, not a textbook but an interpretive guide “‘concerned less with ‘covering the subject’ than with responding to the questions most commonly asked of experts’” (vii). Judged on these criteria, The Soviet Union Today admirably achieves its goals. Smith, Kaiser, Pond, and Shipler have provided enlightening books written from the perspective of intelligent, fair-minded, energetic, and resourceful correspondents. But Cracraft’s work has the advantage of twenty-six individual authors, most of whom are leading experts on the topics they address. And the younger scholars also write with exceptional perceptiveness and authority.

Each of Cracraft’s chapters has endnotes, while a set of briefly annotated “‘Further Reading Suggestions’” of the leading textbooks and monographs in each area follows the concluding chapter. All of this makes The Soviet Union Today an especially important resource for the more serious student of Russia.

Even after having read one or more of these generally good books on the Soviet Union, the Western traveler to the Soviet Union will be surprised by much of what he or she experiences. However, short of studying the culture in depth and visiting the country, one can
become better informed and prepared to deal realistically with the Russians of today through reading these books than in any other expeditious way I know of. Parenthetically, I wish there were even a single book about America in Russian bookstores that compared in quality and integrity with any one of these five books so conveniently available to us.