

Of the thousands of new Soviet organizations established in the years 1985-1991, self help groups and charities are among the less well known. Yet there were , hundreds of them in towns and cities all over the Soviet Union, uniting people with disabilities, large families, single fathers, former prisoners in Stalin's camps and other "victims of terror", people who had suffered as a result of Chernobyl, veterans of the war in Afghanistan and many more. In addition, charities were set up to give all kinds of help to people in need, including voluntary work in hospitals and children's homes, supplements to pensions and benefits, free meals and home help services, wheelchairs and other scarce goods as well as support and advice.

Until the perestroika period, charity was a concept which in official Soviet discourse existed only in reference to bourgeois societies. However, from about 1988 to 1990 the press was full of articles on charity and charitable organizations.

Despite official claims to the contrary, there were manifold inadequacies in the state welfare and health system and the need for a genuinely independent voluntary sector would seem to be indisputable. The failing of the state system are too numerous to mention. However, it is worth mentioning the relative lack of ambition of the state welfare program compared with for instance Britain's. For example, there was nothing quite equivalent to a local authority social worker. It was only in 1987 that social security departments began to provide home help services, when they were able to do so with the help from the Peace fund, which had to find new functions in the post-Cold War age.

The social needs of disabled people were entirely neglected. Disability was defined as an impairment of ability to work. Special medical commissions decided whether a disabled person was capable of part or full time work and therefore the appropriate category for pension but very little help was offered to disabled people seeking work. Social security departments were mostly concerned only with

administering the pensions and benefits systems. As the Minister for Social Security acknowledged in 1989, there was no interest in how—or whether—each individual citizen managed to survive on his or her pension or benefit. In general, there was little concern for individual as opposed to collective rights. As a Moscow News journalist put it in 1990, referring to the state welfare system “our charitable institutions are the mirror image of our social system. . . For decades all Soviet citizens have been seen as a mass, , , not an individual human beings.

Despite the problems encountered by the independent welfare activists, they nevertheless survived the period of the “Second Cold War”, a time when the dissident movement was almost suppressed. This surely illustrates an important point about Soviet Society in the 1990s and the origins of grassroots’ activities under Gorbachev. By the late Brezhnev period, the environment had become in some respects increasingly favorable for the development of non-political independent activities—largely economic or cultural but also welfare. After Stalin’s death, most people gradually moved out of communal flats, privacy became more attainable, and there was decreasing public tolerance of the party’s attempts to fill leisure time with organized pursuits of an ideological character. Many activities took place outside official premises, while official leisure institutions, the houses of culture, etc., had to accommodate to the new situation and make their premises available to clubs of people who were often not particularly concerned with communist ideology, though they might have to adopt the appropriate labels.

Moreover, the “moral” crisis in Soviet society of the mid-1980s stimulated people to set up independent welfare organizations in particular. The independent welfare movement which began to organize openly and on a wider scale in 1987-88 was therefore built on a foundation laid in the preceding years—a period which was by no means as devoid of social initiatives as is sometimes supposed.

If the crisis in Soviet society of the early-mid 1980s was widespread and general in its nature, the early Gorbachev years were marked by a number of quite specific crises which did much to stimulate the development of an independent voluntary sector. A string of natural and man made disasters in the years 1986-89 elicited

enormous public response. The government and the Red Cross collected over \$500 million rubles for the victims of Chernobyl. The Armenian earthquake of 1988 drew many volunteer rescuers to the scene of the disaster, where they were shocked by the lack of organization and by the superior equipment of the Western rescue teams. Unlike in 1896, when foreign help had been refused, the government now welcomed Western Aid. The Red Cross came into its own, acquiring greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public. However, despite the valuable contribution of the Red Cross, the problem encountered by everyone involved with these disasters stimulated the formation of numerous independent organizations, including self-help organizations set up by the victims of disasters. This could lead to tension when victims claimed they had the right to distribute the money collected

The emergence of the new voluntary sector was first and foremost an indication that many ordinary people were beginning to feel able to engage in independent activities. Nothing could have been achieved without the initiative and bravery of the volunteers themselves. In 1987 and early 1988 independent welfare activities for ordinary people could entail personal risk—missed promotion prospects, threats of short-term imprisonment, etc.--not to speak of all the practical difficulties in organizing something so new.

The volunteer organizations shared many features; their activists were in general committed to small scale, person to person help, independently of state structures. They would, for example help out in hospitals and children's homes, escort disable people to the theatre, put them in touch with an employment agency for people with disabilities, collect and distribute second-hand clothes, or provide home help services for elderly housebound people. The emphasis was very much on practical help and psychological support for people in need. Service providers were driven by a general desire to do something useful for society rather than by concern about the particular plight of a defined group of people. They were determine to operate democratically and also very anxious to preserve their altruism: the issue of whether a charity should have paid staff was hotly debated. To some extent they were also consciously trying to educate the public to be more caring and altruistic. However, they could not be influenced by the their changing environment—the gradual collapse of state services

leading to growing need, and the coincidental growth in opportunities for voluntary action—as well as by their own natural evolution towards a deeper understanding of the problem they were ameliorating and a desire to create institutions which would do more than scratch the surface of the problem

Although there were many small local groups with disabilities in the mid-1980s, attempts to revive a national society against the clear disapproval of the Ministry of Social Service finally began to bear fruit in 1987 when people with mobility problems in Moscow started to set up their own city society. After a great deal of active campaigning, particularly on the part of the Moscow disabled activists, and wide spread publicity, there was a sudden change of official heart in early 1988. However, a Soviet wide society was not permitted

By 1989 things changed. By late 1988, Russian Society of Disabled People, which united thousands of grassroots activists as well as the flourishing Memorial societies in Moscow and Leningrad—for war and “terror” dead—were dedicated to provide for the basic needs of people in these associations.

In September 1988 they were joined by the even more general fund for Charity and Health. The idea for such a fund—or at least for a health Fund—had been suggested by the Minister of Health, and found final official approval under his successor’s successor. The ministers agreed that Russian medical technology could not, from the state budget, keep up with the technological revolution in the West and that it was therefore imperative to find extra sources of funding—such as charitable foundation to collect money from the public. The fund was given special responsibility for educating society in the spirit of charitableness and caring for needy elderly, ill and disabled people, although it acquired a catch all character.

Official Reaction

Simply stated official attempts were made to control the new welfare movement from 1988-1990. It seems that from the point of view of the Central Committee and many local authorities, society had been “set in motion” a little too successfully. As soon as the Fund for Charity and Health was set up in September 1988 local

authorities began to make life difficult for the welfare activists. Many grassroots societies were told they could not be registered because now they were superfluous.

This was despite the fact that as recently as August the central government committee had instructed district party committee to cooperate with the public charity movement. Local charities pursued matters to the highest level—a complaint to Gorbachev—but were told that there was no need for organized charity in the USSR and that they would definitely not be registered. Although the State Fund for Charity and Health's officials on several occasions stated that they welcomed cooperation with the independent activists, in the circumstances it is not surprising that the activists adopted a somewhat skeptical attitude toward the fund.

Activists pointed out that they had plenty of volunteers and could offer practical help, even if they had little money, while the State fund had substantial contributions from its influential sponsors. Independent groups found it easier to operate after July 1989 when Gorbachev instructed the Central Committee on the need to cooperate with them. At first, the government bureaucracy attempted to control non-government agencies by taking staff positions and management roles. Many grassroots organizations found that local communist authorities packed its management board.

Activists tried to ward off party control. It was even the case that local party officials left grassroots organizations and organized their own charities thus having open access to charitable funds for personal use.

The Best Years of the Independent Welfare Movement 1989-1990

If the authorities hoped that through the new All-Union charities and self help organizations, they would be able to control the independent welfare movement, they were to be disappointed. By late 1989 the realities of Soviet Politics were generally more conducive to independent activity of all sorts, particularly in Moscow. The Law on Freedom of Conscience of 1 October 1990 finally removed the prohibition on church involvement in charity. In 1990-1991 independent groups mushroomed and became more specialized as for example many disabled people especially with young people and parents with disabled children or people with disabilities other than mobility problems, established their own organization,

The proliferation of new welfare organization was accompanied by a blurring of the distinction between “official” and “unofficial”. For example, *Rabotnitsa*, the mass circulation women’s magazine and organ of the Central Committee, set up the Mariya Fund to aid women who had suffered from “Terror” and began collaborating with the Solzhenitsyn Fund. The Ministry for Social Security itself had launched a campaign in 1989 to persuade people and cooperatives to make donations to local social security departments

Genuine community-based groups began to set up under the auspices of the “official” charities without necessarily feeling that they had to make many compromises to do so. In particular, the Children’s Fund and Fund for Charity and Health were able to overcome initial mistrust to some extent, thanks to their achievements in collecting money and helping their targeted recipients. Having used the Funds as patrons, in their early stages, smaller organizations sometimes split off and become genuinely independent

Existing organizations continually fragmented, because of personal or political differences or deliberate localism and distrust of the central government. Unfortunately, opportunities to distribute foreign aid often led to further conflict. As a result many organizations operated with parallel agendas and very little coordination.

Assessment

The Soviet experience mirrors that of Britain and other countries in that among the new welfare organizations there was a rough divide between self-help groups in which people with disadvantages gathered to protect and advance their interests, and charities which distributed money or other aid to people who needed it. Despite some overlap, one can distinguish two fundamentally different concepts of voluntary action. One might expect the—potentially paternalistic—variant to have been more acceptable to the Soviet authorities. This seems to have been the case, except where “self-help” groups were clearly dependent on the communist party or were assumed to be so.

This was particularly true of groups with an elderly membership. Within the independent welfare movement there was a related, though usually unarticulated split over strategies for change. Should the way forward concentrate on the redistribution of resources and, to some extent, power to previously underprivileged groups? Or should it, as those in favor of “charity” tended to assume, concentrate on the moral revival of the whole of society? This would imply that all Soviet citizens, having supposedly become uncaring and callous, were victims at least of the Brezhnev system or perhaps of the Soviet system as such.

The authorities were naturally more sympathetic to the second strategy, which requires socialization rather than the redistribution of power, and in the early *perestroika* years the “charity” theme fitted well into the political presentation of Soviet problems being caused by a “moral crisis”. When children abandoned their elderly parents or mothers their babies, it was implied, the roots of such behavior lay no deeper than the “years of stagnation” or at most the “cult of personality”. That is to say, the economic and social problems of the 1990s were blamed on the actions or better yet, the non-actions of past régimes. It was not yet self evident that the communist/socialist economy and social system had failed beyond all attempts to “repair” the system.

The authorities felt more threatened if people calling for the revival of charity were implying that the moral crisis in Soviet society had its roots in 1917, as became the increasingly widespread views—among people in the voluntary sector as among the wider public. This change in public opinion roughly coincided with the period from late 1988 to 1990 when the authorities were trying to control the burgeoning new movement.

Numerous activists in the new organizations were, if not dissidents, nevertheless definitely anti-establishment—a term which seems appropriate for many of the social welfare volunteers. In addition, members of the new self-help groups, such as those for people with disabilities, people who had suffered for years from the inadequacies of the state welfare system, were often bitter and conscious of the need for some sort of systemic change, again without necessarily perceiving themselves as dissidents

In the worsening economic situation the self-help groups sometime began to lose sight of their long-term goals, of for example educating the general public and officials about their requirements and points of view, and turned into poor relief agencies. It was said, for example, that in Novgorod the Society of Disabled People's membership doubled as soon as local branches gained access to small stocks of deficit goods. The arrival in the U.S.S.R. of "humanitarian aid" from the West, which Russian self-help groups often helped distribute, furthered this process.

The new Russian voluntary organizations contributed to *glasnost* by exposing the many failings in state welfare provision, Children suffering from cancer, inmates of Stalin's camps and many other groups were recognized at last to exist and to be in need of special help.

It is a measure of how successfully society was set in motion that even its most disadvantaged members felt able to unite into self-help groups and provide each other with a sense of solidarity and companionship, where they had previously been alone. Moreover, they attempted to press for their rights and persuade local and central authorities to treat them as more than a collection of individuals. Charities and self-help groups also tried to convince the public of the usefulness of the new voluntary sector, with apparently somewhat mixed success.

How successful did the new organizations convince the broader public of the worth of an independent voluntary sector? A poll in July 1989 asked "Who could most effectively protect the rights of elderly people and pensioners?" found that only 45% of respondents placed their faith in the state, 31.8% named "public organizations"; 10.45% 'non-official' organizations; and 10.5% 'religious communities and organizations'.

Activists in the emerging voluntary sector displayed a wide variety of attitudes, all of which had roots in the prevailing Soviet political culture. On the one hand were the many that saw their task as the provision of services and/or for whom the revival of charity was first and foremost about the moral revival of society. On the other hand were the others, the large families and the people with disabilities who wished to determine their own fates rather than to live in dependency on the unreliable state

welfare system. However, the disintegration of the economy defeated their plans for economic independence and many self-help groups found themselves distributing Western food parcels. Inflation led to a dramatic reduction in charitable donations and simultaneously placed people who had already been disadvantaged in a situation in which they could do little more than struggle to exist. Although the new voluntary organizations somehow continued to exist, for many Russians, 'charity' now meant giving to beggars on the street.