

The Soviet Internal Passport System

This article examines the internal passport system of the U.S.S.R. and the implementation of the internal passport system by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the U.S.S.R. (the "MVD").¹ The internal passport system is very significant to the Soviet Union as a means of providing desirable population dispersion and ethnic concentration, labor and job allocation, housing allocation, and internal security.

I. KGB and MVD: Agencies of Control

The well-known KGB (the Committee for State Security), despite its image as an ubiquitous agency of investigation, intrigue and terror, is only a part of the Soviet system and by no means the major instrument of control over the Soviet population. Aside from its functions outside the Soviet Union, the KGB deals with all types of internal dissent and crimes against the state (treason, espionage, anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, etc.). The jurisdiction of the KGB, however, is strictly delineated by law and is not all-pervasive. Moreover, it would be a mistake to believe that political opposition giving rise to dissent and crimes against the state is so widespread

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1. Resolutions of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R., No. 109, Concerning the Adoption of a Regulation on the Passport System in the U.S.S.R., [hereinafter cited as 109] and No. 110, Concerning Certain Rules Governing the Propiskas of Citizens, [hereinafter cited as 110], as translated by the authors, are on file with the authors and a copy is available upon request from them.

in the Soviet Union as to render the KGB the principal device for control. The overwhelming majority of the Soviet population has regular contact with and is under the direct control of another governmental organization—the less known but no less powerful MVD.

Like the KGB, the MVD is primarily a police organization. Unlike the KGB, the MVD is in no sense a secret police organization. The presence of the agencies of the MVD is quite apparent to every Soviet citizen. Like any police organization, the MVD is charged with the protection of public order. But, in practice the MVD operates within broader parameters than most police organizations and its most basic function is control over the 273 million Soviet people. Roughly speaking, the MVD is divided into two parts—a department for control over those people who have been sentenced for various degrees of political, economic or common crimes, and a department for control over the rest of the population. The former department is the Chief Administration of Places of Confinement (well-known in the past as the “GULAG”). The latter department, and by far the larger department, is the “Militia,” or regular police. The Militia has broad investigative authority and substantially more investigative personnel than the KGB. The Militia is omnipresent in Soviet society. There are other functions and departments of the MVD, but our focus will remain on the Soviet Militia because one of its functions is the administration and enforcement of the internal passport system, the very means by which the MVD acquires control over all Soviet citizens.

II. The Internal Passport System

To Americans, the Soviet internal passport system is generally known to exist, but its legal structure and the extent of its impact on every Soviet citizen has not been given much attention in the West. One may discern from the very first provisions of the Regulation on the Passport System in the U.S.S.R.² the importance of the internal passport for the entire Soviet population.

The passport of a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is the fundamental document establishing the identity of a Soviet citizen. All citizens who are 16 years of age or older must have a passport. . . .³ When personal identification is requested or required for any reason, the Soviet citizen must show his passport. It is not sufficient to offer a driver's license or any other form of identification. A citizen is subject to a fine for not having a valid passport.⁴

The passport is a biographical capsulization of its bearer in booklet form. It contains a recent photograph of the bearer. It states, inter alia, his name,

2. See 109, *id.*

3. *Id.*, at art. 1.

4. *Id.*, at art. 34.

place and date of birth, nationality (based upon the nationality of his parents), information concerning his marital status and the identity of his children, a record of his military service, his place of work, notations concerning his failure to make court-ordered alimony payments, if applicable, and, most importantly, a *propiska*.⁵

III. The Propiska

The term "propiska" is unknown to Americans and is not translatable into words which will fully embody the concept which is also unknown to Americans. In the Soviet Union, the propiska follows every citizen from the day of his birth to the day of his death, and even beyond.⁶ The propiska is at the very core of the means by which the MVD controls the Soviet population and, perhaps more than any other aspect of Soviet life, it clearly illustrates and is in no small measure responsible for the difference in the quality of Soviet life from American life.

In its simplest form, the propiska is a mere stamp in the internal passport placed there by the "agencies of internal affairs" (Militia).⁷ More significantly, the propiska is a legal right to live in a particular administrative district, on a particular street, in a particular building and apartment, all as set forth in the passport under the propiska stamp. Every Soviet citizen must have a passport with a propiska stamp authorizing his legal place of residence. The propiska, then, is akin to an internal visa because it provides one with official permission to take up residence in a particular place.

The Soviet citizen may not live at a given place without a propiska. Moreover, he may not obtain a propiska for a new place of residence without first having registered his departure from the prior residence.

Citizens changing their place of residence, and those leaving to take up temporary residence in another location for a period in excess of one and one-half months. . . are required to register their departure prior to the departure. Citizens who do not have in their passports. . . notice of their departure shall not be issued a propiska.⁸

This aspect of the Soviet passport system may be the most difficult one for Americans who are accustomed to complete freedom of movement within their country (including the right to leave the country), who may live and work wherever a job opportunity; a better climate, or more affordable housing beckon, without governmental consent and usually without governmental knowledge. The convict on probation who is subject to the requirement of registering with the probation department and obtaining consent to change his residence can better appreciate the impact of the

5. *Id.*, at arts. 3 and 4.

6. *Cf., id.*, at art. 19 (concerning the passports of dead persons).

7. *Id.*, at art. 4.

8. *Id.*, at art. 23.

propiska on the life of every Soviet citizen. While it is true that some Western European countries (e.g., the Federal Republic of Germany) have a system of residence registration and relocation registration, enforcement is quite lax and the element of prior consent is totally lacking.

Every Soviet citizen knows how difficult it can be to obtain a propiska. The first hurdle to clear is to obtain the housing into which one will move—a formidable task in a country where the housing shortage in desirable urban centers is chronic. About one-fifth of the urban population lives in communal apartments which may be shared by two or more unrelated families. Apart from the very difficult task of obtaining a residence, the propiska process itself is time consuming and may be a very frustrating experience. One must complete several forms and submit the completed forms together with other documents to an agency of internal affairs (Militia).⁹

How does the Soviet citizen obtain the right to live in a particular dwelling? Almost all housing is state-owned and there are no individual landlords. While money in hand will usually obtain an apartment in the United States, even with money in the U.S.S.R., one may not obtain the required propiska. If his parents do not make their home available or if he wants to live apart from his parents, as a rule the Soviet citizen must find employment with an establishment which has housing available to its employees. Consequently, his job choice may have more to do with his need for an apartment than his career objectives. In any event, even with the right job, the Soviet citizen may have to wait years for his name to come to the top of the list for available apartments. Having obtained a long sought after apartment, an employee will be reluctant to give up the job, even for more pay or better opportunities because, as a rule, he will have to surrender the apartment with the job. This connection between the passport system, place of work and housing results in an opportunity for governmental control over population movement and housing and job allocation. That the issuance of the propiska is within the province of the MVD renders the MVD a very powerful ministry both from the central planning viewpoint and from the viewpoint of the individual citizen.

IV. Foreigners and the Internal Passport System

The internal passport system may be experienced by an American firsthand and indeed must be if the American intends to stay in the Soviet Union for a period in excess of a month and a half. In 1984, a regulation was adopted by the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. which states:

9. "The form of application for a propiska, the propiska cards, address lists, house registers and other documents concerning the propiska. . . shall be established by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the U.S.S.R." *Id.*, at art. 33.

Foreign citizens staying in the U.S.S.R. for a period in excess of one and one-half months are subject to propiska requirements at the agencies of internal affairs (Militia). . . A propiska must be procured within not more than 72 hours after the time of registration of his external passport.¹⁰

The same regulation covers a foreigner's relocation within Soviet territory and foreigners intending to reside in the Soviet Union must become familiar with the regulations.

V. Conclusion

The preceding has examined generally the means by which the MVD implements the internal passport system. The MVD, with its broad powers and pervasive operations, is but a part of a huge and all-powerful bureaucracy which is, in the final analysis, the essence of the Soviet system.

10. Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R., Concerning the Stay of Foreigners in the U.S.S.R., art. 24 (1984).

