

New, Improved Opiates for the Masses!

By JOHN MUELLER

Mikhail Gorbachev desperately needs to do something to persuade his country that the sacrifices implicit in perestroika will pay off. He will of course try to improve housing and the quantity and quality of food and consumer goods. But this will take years, possibly decades, and Mr. Gorbachev needs immediate results.

Since Mr. Gorbachev cannot offer his people more bread—at least not right away—perhaps he ought to try circuses instead. Rather than waste scarce hard currency on razor blades and pantyhose from the West, as the Soviets have been doing, Gorbachev should import television programs instead.

Western television programming has proven highly effective at making people more content on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The East German experience is instructive. In 1984, during a period of relaxed controls on emigration, the East German government found that the residents of the Dresden area were five times more likely to apply for permission to leave than were people from other areas. The environs of Dresden were known in East Germany as "the valley of the blind" because the city is too distant to receive West German telecasts. Emigrants told Western officials that they left because without West German TV life under Communism was intolerable. The East Germans found that getting even ardent Com-

munist cadres to relocate to Dresden was difficult because of the city's television deprivation. The authorities now pipe West German signals into Dresden by cable.

Similar evidence comes from China. In Canton, a forest of rooftop antennas cranes toward Hong Kong. Getting the point, the Chinese have added dubbed versions of old episodes of the American cop show, "Hunter," and a Mexican soap opera to their schedules, and people build their lives around the telecasts. China has also purchased a Disney show.

In the Soviet Union itself, Estonians record "Kojak" off Finnish television and send the videotapes to deprived friends in the interior.

Whatever over-zealous Communist ideologues may fear, Western TV shows in fact contain very few dangers for the Soviet system. Most of the available programming is largely devoid of content, ideological or other. Anyway, the censors could simply refuse to buy those programs they considered likely to cause problems.

Western shows could even work for, rather than against, the Soviet system. Some East Germans maintain that one of the reasons the people of Dresden were so eager to emigrate was that a lack of exposure to crime and poverty as portrayed on Western television shows left them with inflated expectations about Western luxury. East German viewers regularly complain in letters and telephone calls to West

German television executives that the offerings are too critical of a free society: "Why do you undermine it so?"

The Soviets might start with sports. (It is often claimed that Russians drink so much because there is nothing else to do. A lively sports channel might do more to reduce alcoholism—or, at any rate, public drunkenness—than all of Mr. Gorbachev's sermons on the virtues of temperance.) Beyond that, there are millions of hours of viewer-tested entertainment programs to select from: soap operas, adventures, cartoons, musical extravaganzas and situation comedies. And the competition is likely to force the Soviets to improve the entertainment values of their own programming—as has happened in East Germany.

In a way, better TV might be thought of as glasnost for the masses. Many Soviet citizens have complained that their country's new openness has benefited mainly the intellectuals, who can now read once-banned novels and publish criticisms of the regime. But what about everyone else? Western television has already proved itself a highly successful opiate for the masses. That's exactly what the Soviets need right now.

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