
Defense Report

AUSA



The Production of Arms by the United States and the Soviet Union — a Study in Contrasts

Year after year the Soviet Union produces thousands of tanks and aircraft and dozens of new ships while the United States, with industrial capacity roughly double that of the USSR, is hard pressed to produce three or four hundred tanks, a few hundred aircraft and a small handful of new ships. Since 1960, the USSR has designed, tested and produced sufficient numbers of four new tank models to equip and reequip its forces and is well on the way to fielding a fifth. In the past 20 years, the United States has produced large numbers of a single tank model and is just beginning to produce a second.

How can the Soviets thus outproduce us when our gross national product is almost double theirs? It seems to be a matter of contrasting priorities. The USSR devotes at least three times as much of its GNP to its military budget as does the United States and winds up spending just about double the amount of money for that item of the overall budget. As a percentage of GNP the U.S. defense budget has been consistently at or near five percent while that of the USSR has long since climbed past 15 percent and is now probably approaching 20 percent.

Of course, it is the people of the USSR who pay the price. Although they live in the nation with the second largest gross national product (exceeded only by the United States), they enjoy a standard of living inferior to that found in many countries with smaller GNPs. Consumer goods in the form of automobiles, electrical appliances and even clothing are either reserved for elite strata of citizens, severely rationed or simply unavailable. The Soviet agricultural plan floats from one crisis to another, generating en route shortages of food that frequently approach serious proportions.

The Soviet Union unquestionably has the industrial capacity and the technical know-how to increase the production of consumer goods, but there would have to be a shift in their national priorities and that would, in turn, have to reflect a shift in their political goals. Factories producing tanks do not shift to building refrigerators or even trucks overnight. The shift from military production to creating consumer goods would have to take place gradually and would have to be based on an inward turn of political concern, from seeking to expand international communism to making Soviet communism a more ideal reflection of a true proletarian state. As comforting as it might be to see that kind of a shift taking place in the USSR, it is probably unrealistic to even hope that it might happen. The Soviet society does not suffer change readily since, in its frame of reference, change is most often an admission of failure.

The great strength of the United States is that without unacceptably diminishing the freedom or quality of life of its citizens it can devote sufficient effort to its defense to assure our security. We must constantly reexamine our contribution to our own defense to make sure it stays in balance and that, in the search for the good life, we do not become so weak that we tempt the Soviets in the direction of the ultimate adventure.