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THE SECOND CURRENCY IN THE SOVIET UNION: ON THE USE OF CHECKS IN "VALUTA-RUBLES" BY SOVIET CITIZENS

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COLLOQUIUM

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I. THE QUESTION POSED

The title of this paper may seem provocative. We are used to thinking that there is just one currency in the Soviet Union - the ruble. I thought so myself until I spent my sabbatical in Moscow last year. There I saw that a second currency in fact circulates in the USSR.

What I have in mind are financial instruments issued by state agencies, expressed in rubles, but available only in exchange for foreign currency. I shall call them "valuta-checks". These coupons are accepted as money in "valuta-stores" selling scarce and high-quality goods.

1. Cooperation Invited

Although in use for about 15 years, little is known about valuta-checks, and Soviet publications rarely mention them. The explanation is simple: Valuta-checks and valuta-stores are on the list of subjects not allowed to appear in the open press. The list is binding on Soviet censorship agencies.

Students of Soviet affairs in the West have stopped here. No attempt has yet been made to study the second currency system in the Soviet Union in a comprehensive and systematic way. This is a first try and I invite your cooperation and assistance.

2. The Phenomenon Compared

One way to explain a foreign and seemingly exotic phenomenon is to compare it with familiar equivalents. Take the US Army and Air Force Exchange Service as an example. There are certain parallels. Both operate a closed network of stores. Both extend shopping privileges only to strictly defined categories of persons. Both offer discounts and make shopping profitable. Both insist that the goods purchased not be resold. Here the similarities end. One main difference is the currency used. In the Soviet Union you offer a money substitute purchased with foreign currency; here you pay in your own domestic currency, in \$. If the US government chose to establish Soviet-style valuta-stores within its PX-system in this country, customers would have to pay with scrip purchased with rubles. This seems absurd, but the reverse situation is reality in theSoviet Union.

3. This Paper

The main features of the second currency system in the USSR are outlined below (Chapter II). The text is in a raw and unfinished form; some parts are treated summarily, references to sources are omitted.

The use of a second currency in the Soviet Union has many implications. Some of the economic, legal, ideological and socio-political issues involved are listed in the form of questions and subject headings (Chapters III-VI).

II. HOW THE SECOND CURRENCY SYSTEM WORKS

1. Rubles and Valuta-Rubles

The ruble is a non-convertible and, consequently, purely domestic currency. Gosbank, the State Bank of the USSR, establishes the official rates for the exchange of foreign currencies into rubles and publishes them. These rates are artificial and do not reflect the purchasing power of the ruble.

Internally, Gosbank and other state agencies apply "increases" and "reductions" (in Russian: nadbavki i skidki)(coefficients) in relation to the official exchange rates. They do reflect the purchasing power of the ruble and are needed for planning and accounting purposes. The coefficients provide a means of measuring the profitability of financial operations of the Soviet Union with foreign countries.

Rubles valued at the internal exchange rate are called "valuta-rubles" (in Russian: invaliutnyi rubl'). They are an accounting unit, and consequently, do not circulate.

This is the rule, but there is one exception. Valuta-rubles are used as a basis for issuing "checks" (in Russian; cheki). The checks circulate and may be used on Soviet territory like money. Their use, however, is restricted to selected organizations and citizens. The checks represent, in effect, a second currency in the Soviet Union. It is a currency of a special kind; a one-way currency.

2. Valuta-Checks

- a. There are several kinds of checks. They are issued by:
 - (1) "Vneshposyltorg", an All-Union foreign trade combine in Moscow, subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the USSR. They issue two kinds of checks; one that may be re-converted in foreign currency, and one that may not.
 - (2) "Vneshtorgbank", the Foreign Trade Bank of the USSR in Moscow. Two types are known: so-called "tear-off checks" Series D (for foreigners) and Series A (for Soviet citizens).

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The checks are printed in denominations of 1, 2, 5 and 10 rubles, and 1, 2, 5 10 and 20 kopeks. All checks are paper.

- b. The checks are expressed in rubles, but can be acquired for foreign currency only. See samples in Appendix 1.
- c. The "Vneshposyltorg-checks have a standard format and replace the "certificates" which were in use until 1977.
- d. Checks may be deposited for safekeeping in specifically designated savings banks. In Moscow, four such banks have been so designated.
- e. It is possible that additional state agencies issue money substitutes (in Russian: denezhnye surrogaty), like coupons (in Russian: bony). If so, they are used within the administrative system issuing them.
- f. The term "check" is misleading. This check is not a payment order (like the checks commonly used in the USA), but rather a receipt for foreign currency which entitles the holder to purchase goods and services of equivalent value. To avoid confusion and to indicate its foreign origin, "checks" hereafter are called "valuta-checks".

3. Administration of the Valuta-Check System

The system is administered by a number of state agencies, each acting within the powers conferred upon it. Three types of institutions are most closely involved:

- a. On the administrative level the Ministry of Finance of the USSR. It drafts the foreign currency plan of the USSR and presents it to the Council of Ministers of the USSR for approval. This plan incorporates, among others, the foreign currency plans of individual Ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the USSR (for commercial operations) and the Ministry of the Merchant Marine of the USSR. One part of the All-Union foreign currency plan treats non-commercial operations. The latter is drafted and carried out by the Ministry of Finances of the USSR. Receipts from valuta-check operations are included in the foreign currency plans.
- b. On the banking level Gosbank. It exercises the state monopoly of foreign currency. It has delegated some of these functions to the Foreign Trade Bank of the USSR. The latter bank carries out operations with valutachecks.
- c. On the operative level agencies with foreign currency earnings. One of them is Vneshposyltorg. It issues and sells valuta-checks and exercises control over their use. Vneshposyltorg furthermore
 - (1) serves persons entitled to valuta-check privileges with its network of special stores (hereafter called "valuta-stores"), supplying them with domestic goods of export quality and with

*

imported goods selected by it. The network constitutes a firm named "Berezka";

- (2) performs services for its customers (provides vouchers to holiday resorts and apartments in housing cooperatives);
- (3) drafts and distributes price lists (in Russian: preiskuranty) for goods sold in its valuta-stores for valuta-checks of Vneshtorgbank (but not for goods sold for its own valuta-checks; the prices for them are apparently fixed by USSR State Committee of Prices and the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the USSR).

Additionally, Vneshposyltorg is charged with functions not directly connected with the system of valuta-checks. They include, among others,

- (1) delivery of foodstuffs, for freely convertible currency, to foreign specialists in the USSR. This is a service for foreigners located in remote areas;
- (2) sale of goods for foreign currency to Soviet organizations abroad;
- (3) sale of goods in small wholesale lots for foreign currency to customers abroad;
- (4) parcel operations under license contracts with foreign firms.

Other agencies on the operative level include, among others, the Ministry of the Merchant Marine of the USSR and the Ministry of the Fishing Industry of the USSR. The former is the higher agency for the steamship lines (in Russian: parokhodstvo). The steamship lines operate valuta-stores for the personnel on their payroll entitled to such privileges. The stores are administered by the trade department for each steamship line (called "Torgmortrans") and are known under the firm name "Albatros".

4. Persons Entitled to Use the Valuta-Check System

- a. The authority to grant valuta-check privileges probably rests with the Council of Ministers of the USSR at the recommendation of the Ministry of Finances of the USSR. No statute has been published listing comprehensively the categories of persons entitled to use the second currency system.
- b. The following survey is based on oral accounts and scattered secondary sources. At least five categories of persons enjoying the privileges are known.
- c. First category: Soviet citizens working abroad and earning foreign currency (in Russian: zagranrabotnik). They are entitled to exchange unused portions of their foreign currency earnings into valuta-checks. This can be done in Soviet Embassies and Consulates abroad or in Vneshposyltorg in Moscow. The group includes: diplomats, foreign trade officials, correspondents, foreign

aid personnel, artists and scholars, Soviet citizens in international organizations, mixed companies, Soviet banks abroad, etc.

- d. Second category: Soviet citizens residing in the Soviet Union, but working abroad for Soviet transport organizations, e.g., on ships and planes. They earn a portion of their pay in foreign currency. It may be spent abroad or converted into valuta-checks. The same applies to personnel of the Ministry of the Fishing Industry of the USSR working on trawlers on the high seas.
- e. Third category: Soviet citizens in the USSR with earnings in foreign currency. This group includes, for example, authors who receive fees from foreign publishers.
- f. Fourth category: Selected other groups of Soviet citizens in the Soviet Union. This is apparently a sensitive issue. Information is, therefore, scarce. The selection seems to be based on the following criteria:
 - (1) privilege linked to rank: top party and state officials are rumored to receive a portion of their salary in "gold rubles", i.e., in valuta-checks (called Kremlin ration, in Russian: Kremlevskii paek). This group has been described as the communist nobility;
 - (2) privilege linked to function: officials whose work involves contacts with foreigners, e.g., officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR and of the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the USSR, Vneshtorgbank, KGB, Intourist guides and possibly the staff of Vneshposyltorg;
 - (3) privilege linked to performance: bonus for excellent work on an ad hoc basis, for example, to a policeman.
- g. Fifth category: Foreigners in the Soviet Union. Eligible are diplomats, accredited correspondents, staff of firms accredited in the Soviet Union, officials of international organizations and others. They receive valutachecks series D. Embassies purchase them from UPDK, the Administration for Servicing the Diplomatic Corps, an arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. Some embassies also sell series D checks to nationals even if they do not belong to the above groups, e.g., to exchange students.
- h. Formerly valuta-check privileges were also enjoyed by
 - (1) pensioners who received pensions from abroad
 - (2) immigrants receiving proceeds from their property abroad
 - (3) heirs to persons deceased abroad after accepting the inheritance
 - (4) persons in receipt of foreign currency transmitted to them by relatives or friends abroad.

These privileges were withdrawn effective January 1976. Recipients of foreign currency are now paid the equivalent amount in rubles according to the official exchange rate. Remittances are subject to a duty (up to 30%). Bank fees are also deducted.

The decision had political overtones with regard to group 4. Remittances from abroad reached considerable proportions, and many applicants for emigration and dissidents benefitted from them. The move was directed against them.

i. The rank-and-file Soviet citizen is not entitled to acquire or use valuta-checks. For him it would be an offense punishable under criminal

5. Where Do Valuta-Checks Circulate?

- a. Valuta-checks can be used only in valuta-stores and in transactions with organizations entitled to accept them. Use of the second currency outside this special network is a criminal offense.
- b. There are at least three channels for the sale of goods for valuta-checks:
 - (1) stores performing operations of Vneshposyltorg. They accept valuta-checks of this organization and checks of the Foreign Trade Bank (series D);
 - (2) same as before, but only valuta-checks of the Foreign Trade Bank (series D) are accepted; these stores serve foreigners;
 - (3) stores of the Torgmortrans network; they serve sailors and other personnel of the Soviet Merchant Marine. Such stores, known as "Albatros", can be found in large ports such as Leningrad, Odessa, Riga and Tallinn.

Other agencies enjoying valuta-check privileges may have separate chains of valuta-stores.

c. One network of stores sells for freely convertible currency (cash and bank checks). They are run by the Ministries of Trade of the Union republics and operate under the direction of Trade Departments within these Ministries. In the RSFSR the stores are subordinated to the Republican office "Berezka" (in Russian: Respublikanskaia kontora "Berezka"). Consequently, they are called "Berezka"-stores and are well known to every foreign tourist in the Soviet Union. The name "Berezka" causes confusion, however, since it is identical with the name of the valuta-stores operated by Vneshposyltorg. The two types of "Berezka"-stores should be distinguished. Stores selling for freely convertible currencies do not accept valuta-checks. In Republics other than the RSFSR they have different names. In the Ukrainian SSR they are called "Kashtan".

- d. The airline "Aeroflot" also accepts freely convertible currency on its international flights.
- 6. What Can be Purchased for Valuta-Checks
- a. Valuta-checks are mainly used for transactions in valuta-stores. These stores offer:
 - (1) foodstuffs, a wide range of articles including alcoholic beverages, tobacco, caviar, vegetables;
 - (2) industrial and technical goods, such as textiles, rugs, cameras, radio and TV, sewing machines, furniture and other items in popular demand;
 - (3) cars. In view of the great demand, a special procedure must be followed. Cf. Appendix 2.
 - (4) books: in particular, editions with small print runs and other titles which are hard to find in regular bookstores, e.g., the works of Tsetaeva.

The articles are advertized by Vneshposyltorg in catalogs and bulletins. Many items are imported; the domestically produced goods usually carry the "High Quality" mark (in Russian: Znak kachestva).

No figures are published on the turnover of valuta-stores. Using the number of potential customers and the number of stores as a basis, the annual turnover of the valuta-stores can be estimated at reaching 50 million valuta-rubles. This is a very approximate figure which could well be off the mark.

- b. Apartments. Valuta-checks can be used by Soviet patrons to become a member in a housing cooperative. Such membership carries the right to an apartment. In view of the housing shortage, it is a valuable privilege. The following requirements and procedures must be observed:
 - (1) right of residence in the locality chosen (in Russian; propiska);
 - (2) down-payment of 40% of the share in the housing cooperative. The balance has to be paid in installments over 10 years (6% annually). Payment in valuta-checks. In case of withdrawl, paid sums are refunded in foreign currency. If the new member is transferred back to the Soviet Union from abroad he is allowed to pay the balance in domestic rubles;
 - (3) approval of the local Soviet of the decision of the housing cooperative to confer membership.

Details are regulated in an unpublished Statute of 1971.

Housing cooperatives offer one, two or three-room apartments in modern apartment houses in the large cities (in American terms these are one or two-bedroom apartments). The apartments cost between 800 and 1500 valutarubles. In the 12-year period between 1966-1977 more than 1600 families became members of housing cooperatives and received apartments in this manner.

c. Vouchers to holiday resorts. A list of over 30 popular sites is published in the bulletins of Vneshposyltorg. It includes sanatoria and health resorts. About 4000 persons a year make use of this service. Payment is in valuta-checks of Vneshposyltorg. This excludes foreigners who are supplied only Series D checks issued by the Foreign Trade Bank.

7. And at What Prices

- a. Prices for goods and services available for valuta-checks are expressed in domestic ruble retail prices. This means that all items offered in valuta-stores have the same price tag as identical goods sold in regular stores (if available there). This rule includes imported goods.
- b. The uniformity of prices (introduced in 1977) is offset by the conditions of the sale of valuta-checks. The price at which Vneshposyltorg and other agencies sell valuta-checks depends on the currency offered by the parton. Freely convertible currency buys more valuta-checks than currencies with limited convertibility or with no convertibility at all.
- c. The coefficient for the exchange of freely convertible currency into valuta-checks is 4.6. In other words: 1 domestic ruble bought with US dollars at the official exchange rate is worth 4.6 valuta-rubles. A coefficient of 4.6 corresponds to a rate of 1 valuta-ruble to 0.22 domestic ruble or to a discount of 78%.
- d. One example may illustrate this. A pair of imported women's shoes (an item in popular demand) in a valuta-store is displayed with a price tag of 60 rubles. This is the domestic ruble retail price. The shoes can be purchased for valuta-checks in the amount of 60 valuta-rubles. It is a bargain for a customer who bought his valuta-checks with freely convertible currency. He paid for each valuta-check-ruble only the equivalent of 0.22 domestic rubles when he exchanged his foreign currency at the official exchange rate. He thus obtains the shoes at a 78% discount of the domestic price. A customer without valuta-checks is charged 60 domestic rubles for the same shoes in a regular store (if they are available).
- e. The valuta-check ruble reflects the true purchasing power of the domestic ruble. The black market reacts correspondingly. Valuta-checks are sold at 5 to 8 times their nominal value on the black market.

8. How Long a Second Currency Has Been Used

a. The valuta-checks of Vneshposyltorg presently in circulation have been used since 1977. They replaced "certificates", of which there were three types:

- (1) without a band, acquired for freely convertible currency;
- (2) with a yellow band, available for currency with limited convertibility, mainly of the developing countries;
- (3) with a blue band, sold for currencies of the socialist countries. See the samples in Appendix 1.

Certificates were withdrawn from circulation during 1977. Holders were entitled to exchange them for checks, provided they could show that the certificates were acquired legally. For a sample of an application to exchange certificates into checks see Appendix 3.

- b. The forerunner of the certificates were delivery orders (in Russian: nariad) of Vneshposyltorg. They made their first appearance in 1961. After some years (around 1967) they could be exchanged for certificates.
- c. Valuta-checks of the Foreign Trade Bank, Series D, originated about the same time as the delivery orders. Details are not known.
- d. No other "second currency" was in circulation in the Soviet Union before 1961, although a number of earlier schemes resemble the present system. The differences, however, are greater than the similarities. The most characteristic ones are listed here in reverse chronological order.
 - (1) Torgsin, the All-Union Combine for Trade with Foreigners (1931-1936). It sold, through its network of stores, scarce goods to Soviet citizens and foreigners for foreign currency and gold. Torgsin stores thus paralleled the present cash-valuta stores under the Republican Ministries of Trade. No valuta-checks or other money substitutes based on foreign currency were in circulation at that time.
 - (2) Cooperatives used scrip (in Russian: abonement na zabor tovarov) and other forms of money substitutes. They were issued to members only. This practice was widespread, particularly in the country-side and in times of money devaluation (1918-22), in case of shortages of money bills and coins (around 1930) and in periods when foodstuffs and goods were scarce and rationed (1929-35). The issue of substitute money was prohibited as early as 1922, relaxed in 1930 and categorically baned in 1935.
 - (3) Chervonets and ruble. These two paper currencies circulated side by side from 1922-1924. The chervonets, a banknote, was stable while the treasury ruble was sharply depreciating. No fixed ratio existed between the two. After the currency reform of 1924 the chervonets as well as the ruble remained legal tender until 1947 when the dualism was abolished.

(4) Money substitutes during war communism (1917-1921). The break-down of the monetary system resulted in the widespread use of money substitutes, especially in the provinces. It was Lenin who proposed in 1921 to establish special stores and to issue scrip for foreign visitors and "Comintern-people" in order to provide them with the necessities of life.

III. ENJOYING THE ADVANTAGES: THE ECONOMIC SIDE

The valuta-check system offers advantages to its patrons and at the same time to the state.

1. Patrons

The system has the effect of and leads to a

a. closed store network

Precedents: Closed distributors (in Russian: Zakrytyi raspredelitl', ZR) and Closed workers' cooperatives (in Russian: Zakrytyi rabochii kooperativ, ZRK) (1930-1932); Sections of workers' supply (in Russian: Otdely rabochego snabzheniia, ORSy) (1932-about 1936).

b. supply in kind

Precedents: Class ration (in Russian: klassovyi paek) with four categories (1918-1920); Labor foodstuff ration (in Russian: trudovoi prodovol'-stvennyi paek) with three categories (1920); wage payments in kind (in Russian: natural'naia zarplata) (93% in kind and 7% in money in 1921).

c. preferential supply

Precedents: Selective supply (in Russian: tselevoe snabzhenie) as an incentive to labor productivity (1920 during War Communism and 1929-35 during the period of rationing).

- 2. State
- a. Attraction of foreign currency.
- Inclusion in foreign currency plan.

Opponents of system would have to suggest substitute.

- 3. Parallels Elsewhere
- a. Early socialists: Owen, Proudhon
- b. Bimetallism: Gold and silver
- c. China: National and communist currencies (1948-1950)

d. Occupation money:

- (1) USA Allied military marks (1944-46); Military payment certificates (1946-58 for Europe)
- (2) Germany Credit treasury notes (1939-45)

IV. FACING UP TO REALITY IN THE STATUTES: LEGAL ASPECTS

The legal system is based on one currency. The introduction of a second currency requires amendments of the statutes in effect. It is here that the legal framework of the valuta-check system comes to the surface. Detailed regulations remain hidden in administrative rules of an internal character.

a. Financial law

General rule: state monopoly of foreign currency; transactions

by citizens prohibited

Amendment: transactions permitted with organizations entitled

to accept foreign currency, such as valuta-stores

b. Civil law

General rule: foreign currency transactions by citizens are null

and void

Amendment: transactions permitted if established procedures are

followed; valuta-checks may be a gift to close

relatives

Unresolved: can valuta-checks be taken as pledge by a town

pawnbroker?

c. Labor law

General rule: store managers and cashiers are fully liable,

according to their labor contracts, for losses and

deficits

Amendment: full liability extends to valuta-checks, but the statute

fails to specify how to measure the damage: with or without regard to the coefficient. This is probably

regulated in an unpublished rule.

d. Criminal law

General rule: violation of foreign currency rules is a crime

Amendment: transactions in valuta-checks up to a value of 25

rubles (at the official exchange rate) entails only a

fine of not more than 50 rubles.

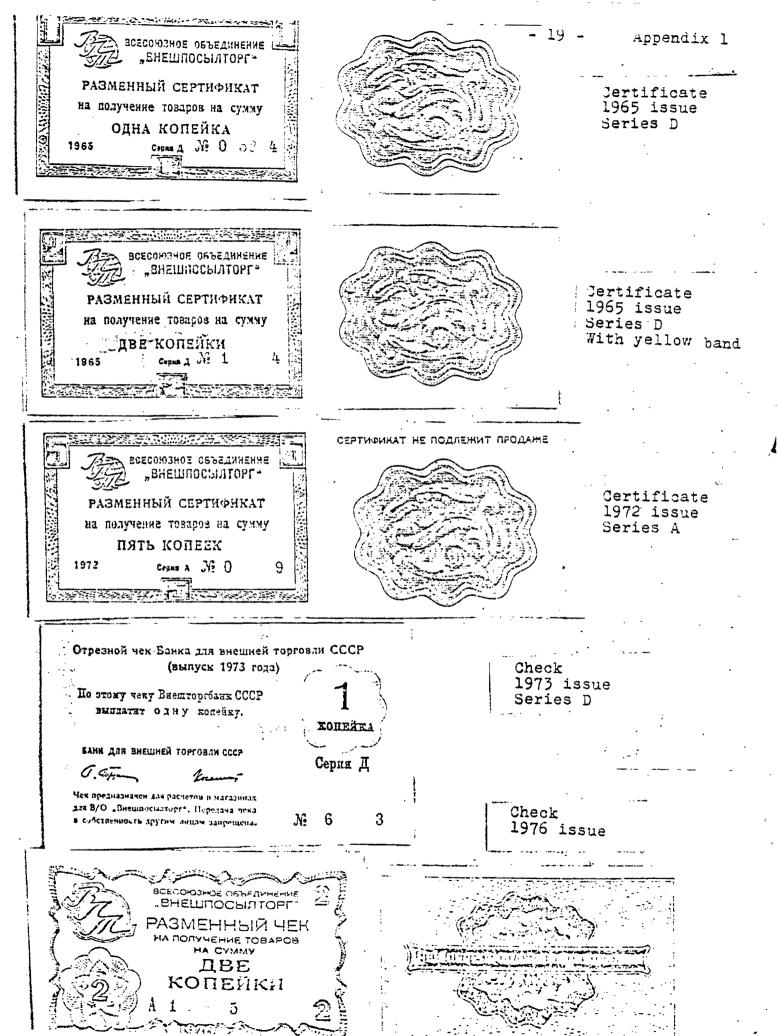
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V. UNEASY COMPROMISE: IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

- 1. In socialism the principle of distribution according to labor prevails. This is a basic tenet of Marxist-Leninist political economy.
- 2. Distribution takes the form of wages. The wages are paid in money. The wage rates vary in accordance with quantity and quality of work done. A differentiation is considered legitimate as a means to stimulate labor productivity.
- 3. The second currency system leads to a differentiation of a specific kind. It grants the privilege of "selective supply". This privilege differs in some respects from the system of selective supply practiced under Stalin in the period of rationing (1929-35). The main differences are as follows:
- a. There is presently no rationing in the Soviet Union. The economic situation in the country has improved markedly in the last 30 years. No compelling economic reasons are apparent which would justify a reintroduction of selective supply.
- b. Today selective supply privileges are granted on the basis of payments in foreign currency. From a political perspective this is an alien and irrelevant criterion for preferential treatment.
- c. In those cases where selective supply privileges are granted on other grounds, the criteria are not revealed and the system is shrouded in confidentiality. A selective supply system hidden from the toiling masses can not be justified ideologically.
- VI CONTROL OF THE CONSEQUENCES: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION
- 1. The second currency system produces effects which, one day, may prove to be alarming. The unwelcome consequences manifest themselves on several levels:
- a. economic to some the valuta-check may appear as telling evidence of the inferiority of the Soviet economic system and of the superiority of the capitalist system;
- b. legal the amendments necessary to accommodate the second currency system demonstrate the inequality it creates;
- c. ideological the second currency system invites criticism; it is ideologically vulnerable.
- d. political the apparent discrimination against the majority of the population is apt to create resentment and ill feelings. This may subvert the solidarity between the masses and the leadership. It may cast doubt on

the sincerity of official pronouncements and lead to disillusionment with the goals set by the dominant ideology. The valuta-check is a trump in the hands of those who believe that socialist states are ruled by a "new class".

- 2. The Soviet government clearly pays a high price for its second currency. But it seems to feel that economic advantages outweigh political disadvantages. Perhaps it relies on the general mood of acquiescence of the people. There are few Soviet citizens who are ready to fight the valuta-check system. Many more prefer to win the privileges for themselves.
- 3. But there might be a situation when the attitude of the people changes. Recent events in the GDR give us some clues.



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