

Who's Last?

It was almost nine years to the day since my arrival in Russia, and I had an insurance claim to take care of at a nearby Ingosstrakh office.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, where 20 people were milling about, waiting to file their claims with agents lined up in a row behind flimsy wooden tables, separated by cubicle dividers.

I sat down at a desk, filled out the requisite form to get our bumper repaired following a fender-bender, signed and dated the document, stood up and settled into line behind four other customers.

After a 10-minute wait, I was approaching an agent when a comely

twentysomething scurried in front of me and informed me that, in fact, she was next in line, despite the fact that she had been sitting on a couch against the wall all the time I was standing.

"And that young man is after me," she told me, pointing across the room to a young, blue-collar type. "You must not have reserved a place in line. You were just standing there."

The familiar symptoms of Moscow Rage quickly overcame me: throbbing arteries, a flushed face, the

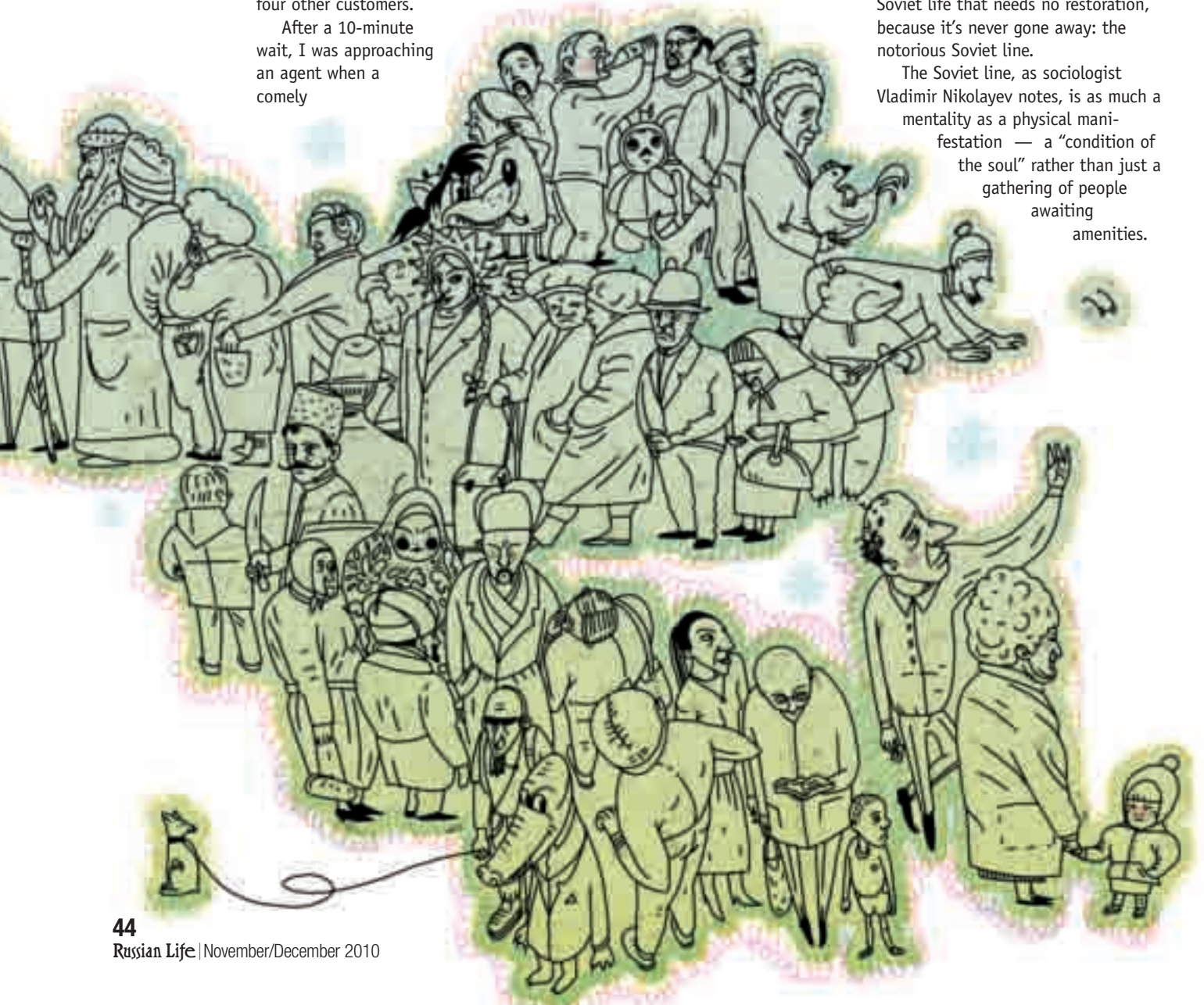
irrepressible desire to punch something, anything.

I stormed out of line and descended the stairs, contemplating what sort of property damage I could incur that wouldn't land me in jail.

I knew, however, that I had only myself to blame: nine years in Russia, and I still hadn't learned how to navigate a line.

Some in the West have been quick to hurl accusations — many of them spurious — that Russia is attempting to restore the Soviet Union. But there is one feature of Soviet life that needs no restoration, because it's never gone away: the notorious Soviet line.

The Soviet line, as sociologist Vladimir Nikolayev notes, is as much a mentality as a physical manifestation — a "condition of the soul" rather than just a gathering of people awaiting amenities.



Indeed, while the torturously long queues spawned by Soviet-era deficits have largely disappeared, the Machiavellian scheming that pervaded those snaking lines lives on in contemporary Russia, where gleeful consumerism has become the unofficial national ideology.

As Nikolayev, a lecturer with Russia's Higher School of Economics, notes in his essay "The Soviet Line: The Past as the Present," modern Russian lines feature typical Soviet behavior, including "the use of various ploys, privileges and physical force ... to improve one's chances of obtaining amenities," as well as "the use of ambiguities in queue discipline for illicit occupation of advantageous spots."

For many Soviet citizens, waiting in lines competed with their full-time jobs for their time and energy. As historian Elena Osokina notes, many even took entire vacations just to head to Moscow to stand in line for scarce products.

The behavior of *Homo Sovieticus* in these lines was of keen interest to Josef Stalin's secret police, which dispatched its own mystery shoppers to queue up and record citizens' conduct and conversations.

According to NKVD records, Soviet secret police chief Lavrenty Beria even personally briefed Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov about two men, Vasily and Grigory, who picked a fight with a policeman while four of their friends used the diversion to sneak ahead in line and "make successful purchases."

"The things the Father of All Peoples worried about!" Osokina dryly writes of Stalin in her essay "A Farewell Ode to the Soviet Line."

Lines in modern Russia are occasionally plagued by violence as well, with in-queue stabbings and shootings popping up in police blotters in recent years.

More common, however, are less confrontational Soviet-era tactics that any Russian consumer worth his salt can execute in his sleep. These include:

Tic Tac Place Back

Perhaps the most common line maneuver across Russia's 11 time zones. The customer enters the room,

clarifies where the line ends by loudly asking, "Who's last?" and reserves a spot by informing the person bringing up the rear that, "I'm after you."

Having secured a place in line, the shopper is now free to leave the establishment and run other errands, confident that he'll have a spot when he returns.

The concept of "You move, you lose" has no currency in Russia, which can lead to some exasperating experiences for the uninitiated.

After observing this tactic crudely employed at a Moscow airport by two middle-aged women darting in front of a pair of honeymoon-bound newlyweds — still in tuxedo and wedding dress — I asked my Russian wife if one could cut into any line by lying and claiming a reserved spot with no proof whatsoever.

"I'd never really thought of it, but I guess you could," she said.

Divide and Conquer

Common in passport lines and at registration desks at airports, or wherever there are several lines for the same service. It requires at least one accomplice and does not preclude the exploitation of children.

Members of a group — often a family with young children operating under orders from the mother — split up with each person taking a spot in a separate line. What follows is a frantic series of verbal and hand communications between the group's members to determine which line is moving faster.

When one member gets close to the front of his line, the entire group quickly abandons their respective lines and joins him, satisfied at having been spared a few minutes of waiting.

In the case of flight check-in, the fact that all of the passengers will eventually be taking off at the same time anyway does not dampen Russians' enthusiasm for this strategy.

The No-Look Pass

One of the more shameless cutting tactics, this move is typically employed in the absence of a straight, well-organized line (i.e. always).

The customer uses the chaotic

arrangement of fellow clients to subtly inch ahead of the person formally in front of him, all the while pretending to be distracted by his surroundings.

Avoiding eye contact is crucial, as meeting the angry gaze of the victim could betray one's cunning. This leaves a convenient escape for the schemer, who, if alerted by his victim that his transgression will not stand, can merely apologize and say he did not notice he was cutting.

A Friend in Need

Depending on one's luck, this routine can leave a person standing in one place for long stretches while watching a steady stream of customers join their friends and acquaintances at the front of the line.

While saving places for others is common in other countries as well, in Russia the practice is distinguished by a general disregard for subtlety.

In the West, if a person sees his friend at the front of the line and opts to cut in, the process is typically carried out with little fanfare to avoid enraging bystanders.

In Russia, however, those in line will enthusiastically wave their most remote acquaintances into the queue.

I paced around the downstairs lobby of the Ingosstrakh offices for about 10 minutes, checking my pulse periodically as the security guard eyed me suspiciously. I wanted to splash some cold water on my face before returning to file my claim, so I asked him if there was a bathroom for paying customers.

"Sorry, no bathrooms here," he said.

I decided I had calmed down sufficiently to give it a second try and trudged back up the stairs, passing the young woman who had cut in front of me as she left the building with her beau.

Several customers glanced at me upon my return as if curious to see whether I'd dispense of my visceral, visible rage in some unseemly fashion.

But I was drained.

"Who's last?" I muttered.

