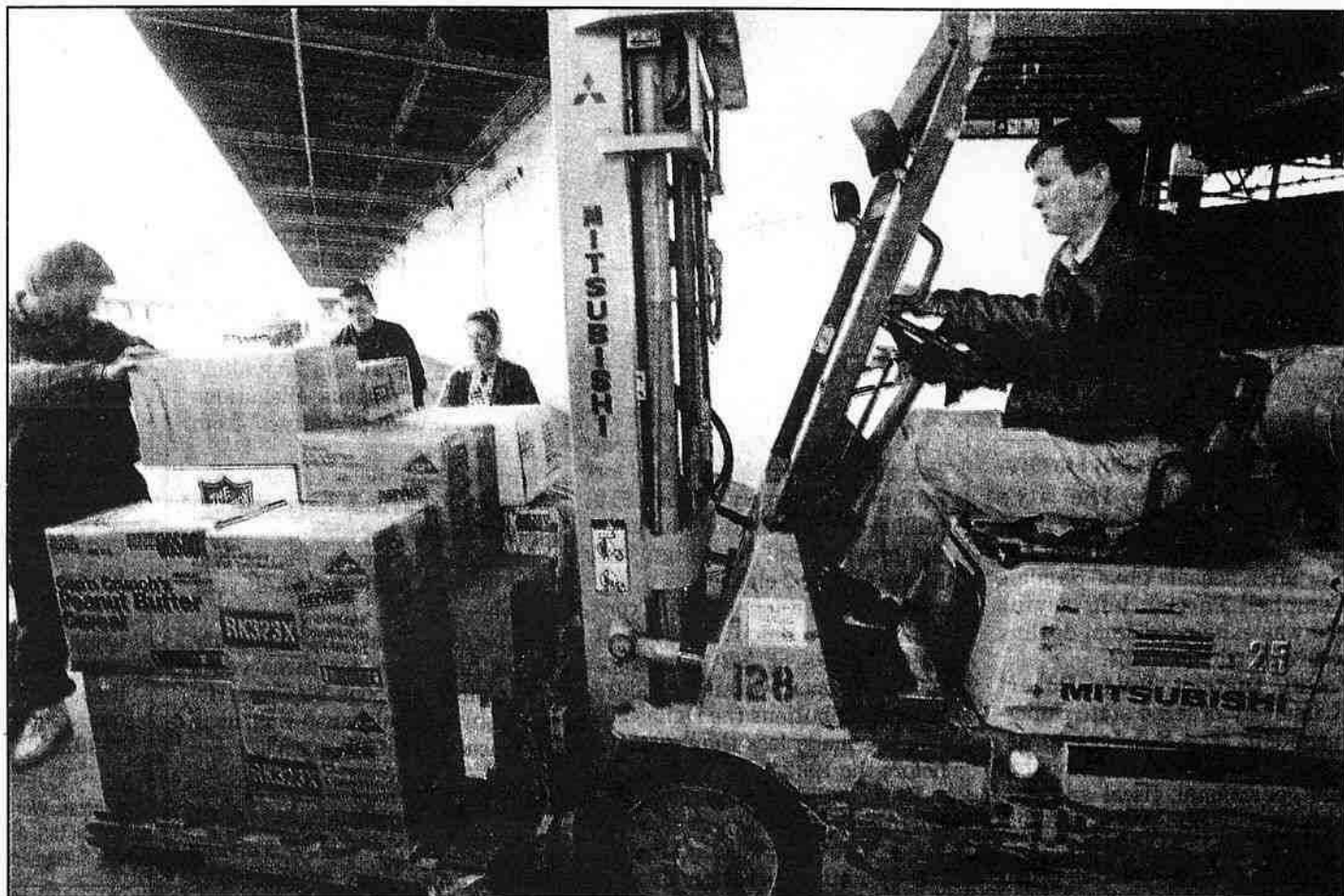




## Aid: He's shipped 3,350 tons of goods



Bee/Jay Mather

Ivan Venikov pilots a forklift full of food and other supplies headed for the former Soviet Union. Venikov's

nonprofit Christian mission collects donations from all over the country and ships them out of Sacramento.

## To Russia — with ulcers

### Intense 'czar' hustles aid from Sacramento to Siberia

By Stephen Magagnini  
Bee Staff Writer

**L**isten my children and you shall hear how Ivan Venikov, newly minted U.S. citizen from Sacramento, is trying to save Mother Russia.

We begin with a day in the life of Ivan Venikov: Arrive in Moscow at dusk. Run from airport goons. Bribe Russian customs officers, cops and airline officials. Fix things with the Russian mafia. Fly to Ukraine, then Siberia. Drive all night across frozen tundra to ensure 40 tons of cereal, rice, clothes, toys, blankets, appliances and medical supplies get to the orphans; the bed-ridden; the desperate, starving citizens of the harsh, lawless, polluted expanse that was

once the Soviet Union.

"Daddy, tell about the time you were jumped by five men while changing money in Ukraine," says Venikov's 11-year-old son Mike, one of five children clustered around the table in Venikov's spotless south Sacramento home.

"Somebody pushed me from behind and said, 'Police,' and another guy grabbed my money," Venikov said. "I was sergeant in Russian army — five or six people for me is nothing," Venikov said, demonstrating how he routed the ruffians and took *their* bank-

# The Sacramento Bee

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roll.

Since January 1990, Venikov has helped ship 3,350 tons of goods worth nearly \$8 million to the former Soviet Union.

From a tiny office in east Sacramento, Venikov — equal parts hustler, humanitarian, angel and adventurer — runs a nonprofit Christian mission called To Russia With Love that collects donations from dozens of organizations, companies and individuals throughout America. He and his volunteers pack the goods into giant containers, then ship them out of the Port of Sacramento.

And then Venikov, 37, travels to the former Soviet Union to make sure the fruits of his hard labors go to those who most need them.

This week he's shepherding 21 tons of Washington state apples, seeing that they wind up in the hands of hungry families instead of pirates or profiteers.

"On his last trip Ivan found out that food and several thousand dollars worth of Christmas presents for children had been lifted from one of the containers," said his assistant, Ruthmary Bergman. "Russian Customs won't say anything about it. They're asking for hundreds of extra dollars. The price of bribes has gone up."

Venikov has gone back to iron things out and keep an eye on the Washington apples and two other containers bound for Ukraine.

"He is cunning and wise — he has developed the rapport to get his work done without undue problems and bloodshed," said Fritz Cienfuegos, who spent two weeks last year helping Venikov distribute 3,800 cases of baby food donated by a church in Las Vegas.

Venikov — who says he's paid \$1,000 a month by the group he founded — drives himself and his army of volunteers relentlessly.

"He likes to keep up a pretty fast-paced trip, and he doesn't take much time out for little things like sleep," said Arild Barrett, a student at California State University, Sacramento, who made trips with Venikov in 1991 and 1992. "For the first four nights we were there he didn't sleep at all. . . . He prides himself that sleep is for wimps."

Venikov comes back from each trip with terrible stomach ulcers, Bergman said. "No problem," he says, and brings out some potion he brought back from Russia."

In 1992, Barrett said he went with Venikov to Kurgan, a Sacramento-sized city in Siberia, and spent the night with Venikov's relatives.

"They didn't have an indoor toilet,"

Barrett said. "Here was a superpower with men in space, a nuclear threat to the U.S., and people in a fairly good-sized city were living the way Americans lived 100 years ago."

In Kurgan, they visited a hospital where Venikov had shipped medicine.

"The lights were burned out in the hallways and medicines we take for granted weren't there at all, like pain relievers and antibiotics," Barrett said.

In Sacramento, Venikov — often clad in a black leather jacket, jeans and black Nikes — can be found giving orders to donors and volunteers alike.

"He's like some czar — he calls all the shots, and what he says goes," Barrett said.

When Venikov's not working the phones, he's working a calculator — or a forklift, loading 40-foot containers at the Sacramento Army Depot.

"Every week we load two or three containers, every time to a different city," Venikov said before his latest trip. "Some people give money, and we buy rice and clothes and medical supplies. Today my truck goes to L.A. and picks up seven tons of toothbrushes and vitamins."

Venikov said he spent his first four months in the United States on welfare, then worked installing marble for two years.

"In 1990, I loaded my first container," he said. "I call many companies, pay for shipping, do everything."

Venikov has since shipped 185 containers to 29 cities and towns in the former Soviet Union.

In 1992, the State Department began paying the shipping costs of To Russia With Love and 500 other organizations that send aid to the former Soviet republics.

"We've raised over \$429 million in privately donated humanitarian aid at a cost to the government of only \$43 million," said Jim Bayer, who oversees the State Department's shipping program.

The program is intended to promote democracy in the struggling former Soviet republics, said Bayer.

Still, private humanitarian assistance is dispensed largely on a "who's starving and who's dying this week basis," said Mark Sloman, spokesman for Military Professional Resources Inc., a private company hired by the State Department to do the shipping for To Russia With Love.

At the Army Depot loading dock, Venikov gathers his team of 13 volunteers in a circle. They say a little prayer, then start loading.

"He outworks any five guys in the U.S.," said Glenn Cross, a volunteer

from the Center for Sharing in Walla Walla, Wash.

Last September, Cross said he helped Venikov deliver beds, hospital supplies and canned vegetables to churches, hospitals and orphanages in remote areas.

In Kurgan, when Venikov passed out goods to 300 families, Cross recalled telling Venikov: "These guys don't look poor to me — their clothing looks very nice." He said, "Sure, I brought them those clothes on my last trip."

Cross said a woman in Kurgan told him "her husband was dying of cancer, hadn't worked in a year and if Ivan wasn't bringing food and clothing over she and her children wouldn't make it. Every story was like that."

Venikov says his strongest allies are the Russian mafia.

"Sometimes they help," he said. "They take money from people who do business, but they say, 'Nobody touch you.' They know we help people."

In addition to the wheat, wheelchairs and other goods donated by groups in a dozen states, Venikov — for a fee — ships hundreds of boxes packed by Sacramento residents for relatives back home.

Since 1989, more than 20,000 refugees — most of them evangelical Christians like Venikov — have fled religious persecution in the former Soviet Union and settled in Sacramento.

"Go out to the flea markets on Saturday morning — you'll find hordes of Russians buying clothes for pennies," said Sergei Shkurkin, a Russian-speaking consultant. "They go straight to Venikov with this stuff. It's going to Russia, where a pair of pants costs a month's wages."

The refugees have also cleaned out agencies that give free food and clothes, angering other needy Sacramentans, Shkurkin said. "It's not for themselves — they send it over."

Nicolay and Ludmila Yermolov, who came to Sacramento last year, have sent things such as a turkey and car batteries to relatives in Uzbekistan.

"People are starving to death — companies and factories have shut down, and those that are open are paying people with promissory notes," Ludmila said.

Venikov says his next trip will be to the strife-torn Black Sea region, where hundreds of thousands of refugees fled conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan with little more than the clothes on their backs.

He doesn't mean to neglect Sacramento. "We understand 'God Bless America,'" said Venikov, who became a citizen last June. "But if you have everything here, and somebody has nothing, you must help."