

A Russian Silent Spring?

Books in Brief

*Ecocide in the USSR:
Health and Nature
Under Siege*
by Murray Feshbach
and Alfred Friendly, Jr.
New York: Basic Books,
1992, \$24.00.

By Lynda L. Maillet

In their book *Ecocide in the USSR*, Feshbach and Friendly use their remarkable and careful research to show the devastated state of the environment and health care system of the former Soviet Union. They present an extraordinary array of disturbing statistics to illustrate the severity of the situation: 70 million people living in cities are in danger of life-shortening diseases from air that carries five and more times the allowed limit of pollutants; almost three quarters of the surface water in the ex-USSR is polluted; and 25 million acres of cropland are still overloaded with DDT, years after it was banned in other nations.

The authors address the origins and symptoms of a degraded environment caused by “heedless industrialization compounded by failure to measure the social costs of exploiting limited natural resources.” They point to the beginnings of the problem in the Bolshevik revolution and leaders’ emphasis on rapid industrial development. The emphasis on large-scale industrial projects, like canals and dams, stemmed from an exaggerated faith in economies of scale. Many of these projects were ill-

conceived and have since caused environmental damage far exceeding any benefits provided over the years. The regime’s historical mania for

secrecy has compounded the difficulties by restricting public knowledge of problems and making it difficult to gather information.

The origins and consequences of the “infirm” health care system are also discussed in detail by Feshbach and Friendly. There were early successes in the new Soviet health care system where doctors worked for the state and society rather than for the individual. The incidence of certain diseases fell radically in the 1920’s and won many Western admirers. However, the system deteriorated over the years as more resources were poured into heavy industry and defense and less into consumer goods and the welfare of the people, including health care. The fact that many hospitals in the former Soviet Union do not even have running water, let alone hot water, is a telling sign. The deterio-

rating conditions and lack of equipment and medicine in almost all hospitals puts the ex-USSR on a par with or below many developing countries. The authors’ description of what most patients, many of them children, must endure is painful.

Of greatest concern is the danger to the people caused by the excessive levels of pollution; infant mortality and respiratory disease in certain regions are among the highest in the world and life expectancy in the entire nation has actually dropped since the 1960s. The authors point to some of the root causes of the disregard for the environment: the performance measures used under central planning—often simply gross output—induced producers to focus solely on this measure and ignore costs (whether they be input costs, social costs, or environmental costs). All natural resources were considered state property, and Soviet planners and managers treated them as “free” goods, with no cost to the user and no incentive to economize on their use or preserve them. Higher up the chain, government officials were concerned more with output in their region than with how clean their rivers were (as they were accountable to their superiors rather than their populations). In general, the Soviets favored projects with the highest economic returns regardless of the social costs—a point amply supported by the data Feshbach and Friendly supply. The environmental and health situation in certain areas of the ex-USSR is probably even worse than indicated, given the likely Soviet reporting bias.

While the West, including the United States, started paying serious attention in the late 1960s to the costs of the destruction of the environment, the Soviet Union did not even have its own version of an environmental protection agency until 1988 (Goskompriroda, the State Committee for the Protection of Nature). Although the Soviets did have legislation limiting air pollution dating back to 1949, the fines were minimal and enforcement was lax—making the laws virtually worthless. Similar problems affected laws from the 1960s which addressed water pollution in Lake Baikal, the Black Sea, and the Baltic Sea.

Ecocide is meticulously documented with statistics covering all areas of environmental pollution. While much current attention has gone to industrial pollution, Soviet agriculture

This article has been reprinted from:

East/West Letter

Okno Group’s Bimonthly Analysis of Economic and Political
Issues in Eastern Europe & the former USSR

Volume 2, No. 1 Winter 1993



The clean-up of offending plants is made even more difficult by a lack of funds and the disruptive effects of the economic reforms.

has had its own problems. Irrational use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, failure to rotate crops, and cultivation of fragile soils have caused damage to crop lands that will last for decades to come. Clear cutting of forests, particularly in the Siberian Far East, has powerful ecological effects and contributes to world environmental problems such as global warming.

Feshbach and Friendly's separate discussions of the drying up of the Aral Sea, industrial air pollution (especially in "company towns"), and water pollution are particularly distressing. The levels of air pollution and water pollution and their accompanying health problems would be completely unacceptable in the West. At a minimum, Western governments would be forced to offer better medical care to the people in the affected regions. Problems inherent in the energy sector, particularly nuclear plant safety, and waste disposal also pose daunting burdens for the now separate republics to assume. As an example, the former Soviet republics have still not adopted the use of unleaded gas or catalytic converters in automobiles.

The clean-up of offending plants and factories in the ex-USSR is made even more difficult by a lack of funds and the disruptive effects of the economic reforms currently underway. Environmental activists attempted to start a clean-up movement in the late 1980s, but faltered. Feshbach

and Friendly's discussion of early environmental activism in the USSR, starting in 1988 and 1989, describes the ways in which many activists were propelled to political power during the years immediately following Gorbachev's opening of society and politics. Activists in republics outside of Russia protested the way the central government exploited their resources and people.

These groups played a large role in the independence movements in many of the republics. Environmental groups were responsible, in part, for the introduction of a system of pollution fees and fines in 1989 and 1990 and for the shut-down of hundreds of factories for environmental reasons. However, these plant closings led to shortages of all types of products, including pharmaceuticals and food, throughout the system because of central planning's legacy of monopolies. The shortages caused a backlash of criticism against the environmentalists. Their influence has further waned with the decline of concern for the environment prompted by the economic problems since

the onset of reform. Nevertheless, the problems will not simply go away; and though in the current situation many polluting plants cannot be shut-down, considerable investment and effort are needed to implement pollution control measures.

The authors point out that a clean environment is inextricably linked to economic prosperity; ignoring environmental problems affects the people's health—weakening the workforce—and jeopardizes the quality and continuing availability of natural resources. Even national security is affected by the neglect: the health of the military has been affected to such an extent by pollution and the lack of good medical care that they are unfit as an army according to Feshbach and Friendly. However, allocations to the anti-pollution programs designed by the Soviets are much too small to do any real good, and funding in any amount for environmental or health care programs is severely lacking. Even basic instruments, such as meters to measure energy and water use are rare; environmental monitoring equipment is even harder to come by. The absence of this kind of fundamental infrastructure makes it difficult to get a handle on the current situation and nearly impossible to determine the most cost-effective ways to reduce pollution and conserve resources. Feshbach and Friendly do not outline how these problems can be solved, but they give a few examples of Western assistance by individuals, especially in the health field, that have made a small difference.

Although the book is not explicitly a call to arms, it is hard not to take it that way. The environmental situation and the health of the people are in such disastrous shape that Westerners would almost feel obliged to do something after reading this book. It is obvious that the peoples of the former Soviet Union will not be able to solve all these problems without technical and especially financial aid from the West. In addition, they will need help crafting laws and regulations to guarantee a cleaner environment and sanitary and adequate medical facilities. The authors seem to point to environmental and health problems as major causes of the decline and break-up of the Soviet Union. The persistence of these problems casts a shadow on the future of the post-Soviet republics. *Ecocide* is meticulously documented and argued. Anyone interested in the problems of the former Soviet republics should read Feshbach and Friendly's discussion of their causes and their dramatic consequence: the eventual decline of a powerful empire. ◇

For more information about the *East/West Letter*, please contact:

Okno Group

1217 Olivia Avenue

Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 USA

Tel: +1-734-995-5934

Fax: +1-734-995-6349

Internet: pubs@okno.com

Web: www.okno.com